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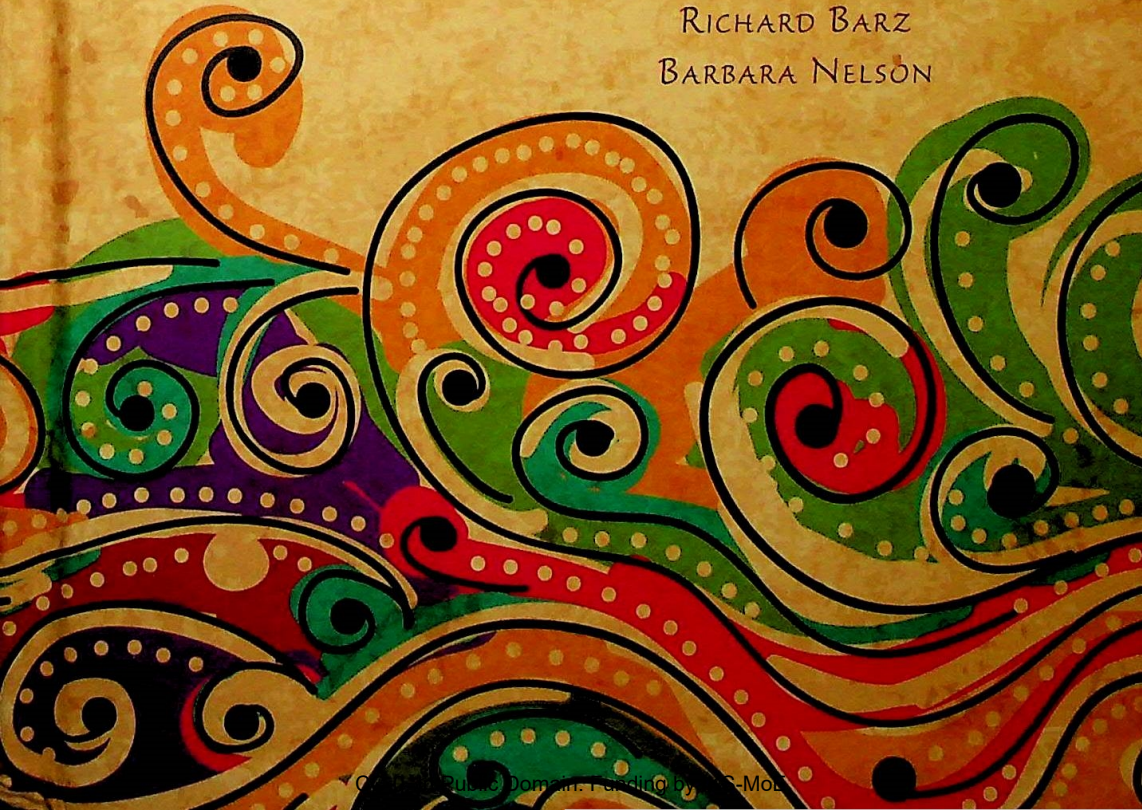
an anthology of writings
on the

Ganga

Goddess and River
in History, Culture, and Society

edited by
Assa Doron
Richard Barz
Barbara Nelson



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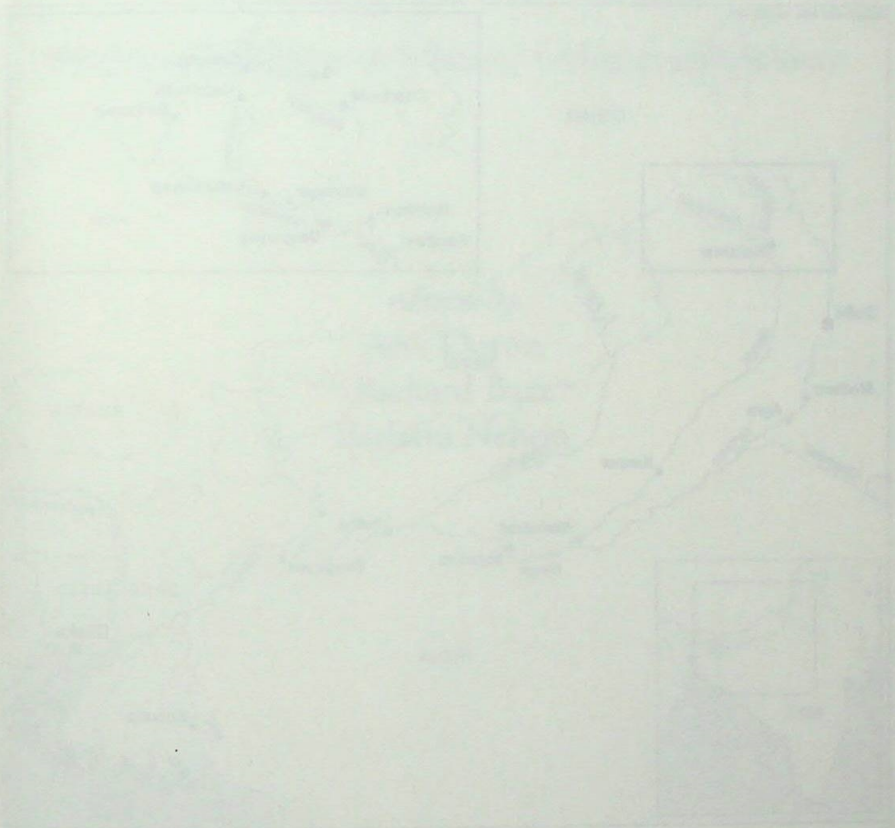

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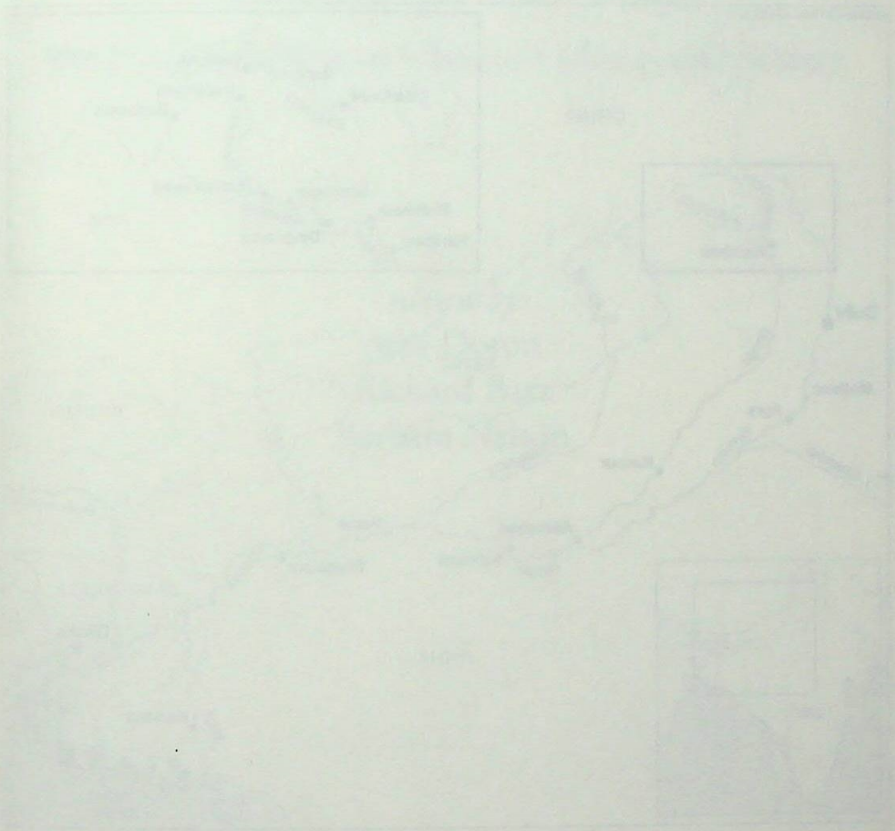

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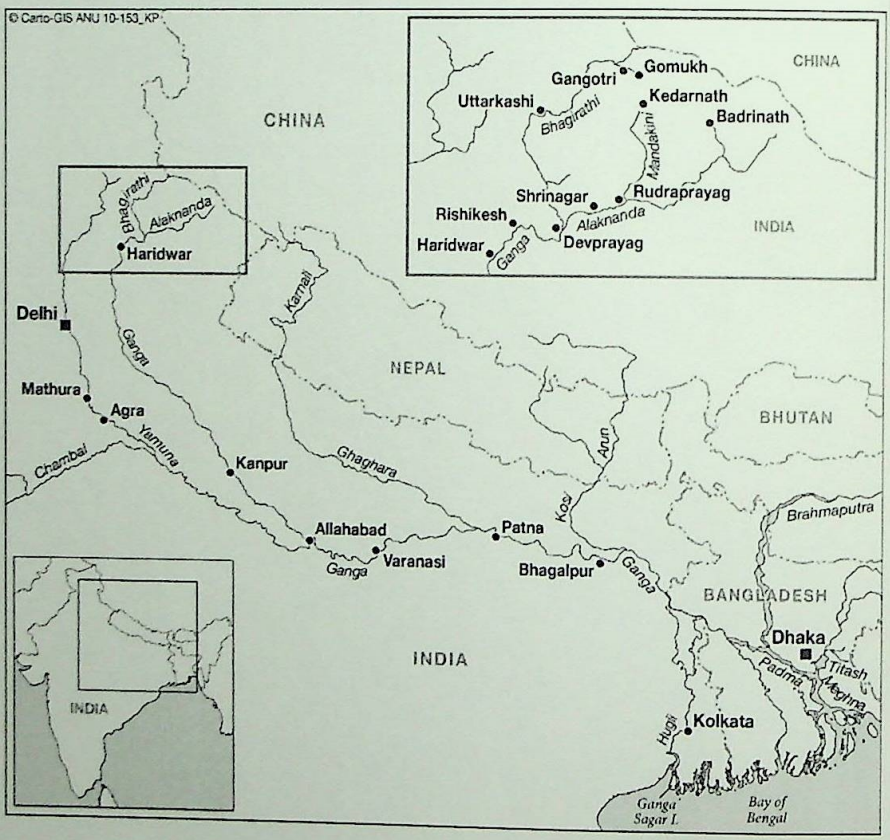

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Contents

Acknowledgements ix

Introduction xi

THE EPIC AND NUMINOUS

The Descent of the Ganga

The Rāmāyaṇa of Vālmīki 3
translated by Robert P. Goldman

The Mahābhārata 17
translated by J.A.B. van Buitenen

The Descent of the Gaṅgā 26
Anne Feldhaus

Poems and a Will

Prayer to Mother Goddess – 1 30
translated by Shakuntala Varma

Prayer to Mother Goddess – 4 32
translated by Shakuntala Varma

Sohar – 10 34
translated by Shakuntala Varma

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Sohar – 11 36
translated by Shakuntala Varma

A Pond Named Ganga 38
Chandrashekhar Kambar

Will and Testament 42
Jawaharlal Nehru

HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVES

Travels in India 47
Jean Baptiste Tavernier

India in the Early 19th Century: An Iranian's Travel Account, translation of *Mir'at ul-ahwal-i jahan numa* 55
Ahmad Behbahani

Account of a Journey to the Sources of the Jumna and Bhagirathi Rivers 61
James B. Fraser

Letter to a Friend 70
Honoria Lawrence

On the Ganges 79
E.B. Havell

CONTEMPORARY TRAVEL WRITING

The Way to Mirzapur 87
Eric Newby

A Long Time on the Ganga 100
Raghubir Singh

Gangotri 109
Vijay Singh

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Digitized by eGangotri and Sarayu Trust.

The Sage's Wet Hair 117
Ilija Trojanow

Sunrise on the Ganga 122
Brij V. Lal

FICTION

Padma River Boatman 135
Manik Bandopadhyaya

Rām Terī Gangā Mailī 146
translated by Richard Barz

On the Ganga Ghat 151
Raja Rao

The Rainbow 159
Adwaita Mallabarman

A Suitable Boy 168
Vikram Seth

Beginning Again 186
Amitav Ghosh

The Drowsiness of Chait Dulls the Spirit 190
Rudra Kashikey (Shiv Prasad Mishra)

RECENT SCHOLARSHIP

The Bengal Steam Department's Hindus and Muslims 199
Henry T. Bernstein

The Ganges in Bengal 218
Steven G. Darian

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Gaṅgā: The Goddess Ganges in Hindu Sacred Geography 233
Diana L. Eck

Why Sink Flowers? Bringing It All Back Home 252
Ann Grodzins Gold

Separate Domains: Hinduism, Politics, and Environmental Pollution 272
Kelly D. Alley

Gangotri, Gomukh and the Sources of the Ganga 302
Richard Barz

Hello Boat! The River Economy in Banaras 325
Assa Doron

Copyright Statement 341

Glossary 344

Index 347

About the Editors and Contributors 350

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Introduction

The Ganga or, as it is also known, the Ganges—along with the Nile, the Tigris and Euphrates, the Yangtze and the Danube—is one of the great rivers of our planet. Each of these rivers serves not just as a provider of water, bearer of goods, and definer of borders but as an archetypical nourishing mother of human civilization. While all of these rivers are mothers figuratively or symbolically, only the Ganga is Ganga Ma, Mother Ganga, in the most literal possible sense for hundreds of millions of Hindus. This puts the Ganga in a league of its own and makes of it an alluring subject for writing of all genres—from the historical, geographical, and ecological through the cultural, religious, and anthropological to the poetic, mystical, and philosophical. Equally alluring for us has been the challenge of compiling this anthology of writings on the River Ganga. We have selected samples from this range of genres since the seventeenth century, focusing mostly on the past 200 years.

Beginning this anthology with mythological accounts of Ganga's descent to earth is essential if we are to appreciate some of the ideas, concepts, and practices that have excited generations of writers across various disciplines and persuasions. One way to orient ourselves in our journey along the Ganga is to engage a tour guide. In fact, we envision two guides, as it were, who might shed light on our path and choices for compiling this anthology: the Hindu philosopher and reformer Vallabha (1478–1530) and Vyasa, the traditional compiler of the *Mahabharata*.

Our first guide, Vallabha, has been our inspiration for including articles on the basis of their authors' manner of perceiving the Ganga. In verses 5 to 6 of his *Siddhāntamuktāvalī*, Vallabha explains that there are three degrees of perception through which one may regard the Ganga: firstly as a stream of material water, secondly as a stream of material water with the spiritual capability to remove sin, and thirdly as a sin-removing stream of water that is the manifestation of the divine Ganga Ma.[1]

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The authors of some of our selections, notably Eric Newby in 'The Way to Mirzapur' from his *Slowly Down the Ganges* and Manik Bandopadhyaya in a chapter from his Bengali novel *Padma River Boatman*, present the Ganga through Vallabha's first degree of perception. For them the river is an elemental force: fecund and full of beauty but dangerous and impossible to predict.

In other selections we find authors who look at the Ganga with Vallabha's second degree of perception as a source of spiritual cleansing and redemption. For some of these authors this spiritual perception is framed in terms that are religious. For example, in the Hindi story 'The Drowsiness of Chait Dulls the Spirit' by Shiv Prasad Mishra, who often writes under the pen-name Rudra Kashikey, Pundit Padmanand finds redemption (*moksha*) in the Ganga at the end of his life as 'he struggled to drink a few handfuls of water'. In a more ironic portrayal of religion, Ilija Trojanow in 'The Sage's Wet Hair' describes an Indian Oil signboard at Haridwar which advises pilgrims: 'Whoever sings the *aarti* daily—switch off engine at a signal and save 20% petrol—shall achieve *moksha* effortlessly'. Other selections are by authors who are not religious but nevertheless find spiritual purification in the Ganga. One of these is that most avowedly secular of Indians Jawaharlal Nehru who, in his 'Will and Testament', was moved to write that 'The Ganga, especially, is the river of India, beloved of her people, round which are intertwined her racial memories, her hopes and fears, her songs of triumph, her victories, and her defeats.' Vijay Singh is another author who in his highly personal narrative 'Gangotri' describes how, with a bottle of rum in his hand, he experienced an epiphany involving his beloved, his mother, and the Ganga all in one.

In a third group of our selections, the authors are solidly in the realm of the goddess Ganga. Among these is the anonymous folk poet who cries out in anguish, in Shakuntala Varma's translation, 'O Ganga give me a big wave so that I drown in it' and Diana L. Eck who pays scholarly homage to the Ganga in her 'Gaṅgā: The Goddess Ganges in Hindu Sacred Geography'. The apparent gulf between the unquestioning devotion of the folk poet and the sophisticated gaze of the anthropologist is bridged by the validity of the desire for the divine in the human heart that both accept.

Of course, in relatively few of our selections is only one of Vallabha's degrees of perception of the Ganga present. After all, the whole point of Vallabha's conception is that the third degree of perception comprises the first and second and the second contains the first. The way that the three degrees of perception fit into each other is especially well illustrated by the various myths of the origins of the Ganga found in the ancient Ramayana and Mahabharata texts, translated

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by Robert P. Goldman and J.A.B. van Buitenen respectively, and in modern guise in the legends told in the excerpt from Vikram Seth's novel *A Suitable Boy*. In the same vein are the efforts of Amitav Ghosh's geologist in 'Beginning Again' from his novel, *The Hungry Tide*, to link the material perspective of natural science with the transcendent Ganga by asking his students 'What do our old myths have in common with geology?' and answering his own question with the words 'Goddesses, children ... Don't you see: goddesses are what they have in common.' Finally, there is the contrast of the uncompromisingly material geographic approach to the Ganga found in the excerpt from James Fraser's 'Account of a Journey to the Sources of the Jumna and Bhagirathi Rivers' with the spiritual and divine geography of the Ganga of Hindu poets discussed by Richard Barz in 'Gangotri, Gomukh and the Sources of the Ganga'.

This interweaving of the various realms of social life—economic, cultural, and spiritual—are illustrated by Doron's study of the river economy of Banaras (Varanasi), where boatmen lay claim to the prestigious title, Sons of the Ganga, often to the chagrin of their upper-caste counterparts. Such claims have spiritual and ritual significance, as well as political and economic ramifications, for the everyday lives of marginalized groups and their struggle for self-assertion.

While Vallabha's material, spiritual, and divine degrees of perception provided a productive set of criteria for choosing the selections for this anthology, they are much too pervasive in the collection to be useful for organization. For purposes of organization we have followed Vyasa's cue in the way in which his Mahabharata embraces the numinous and the historical together with accounts of famous places, outright fiction, and scholarship.

We begin the anthology with the numinous, providing from the Ramayana and the Mahabharata accounts of how Ganga Ma descended from the heavens to offer salvation on earth. Although these narratives are coherent in spirit, they are by no means mutually consistent in fact. The Ramayana explains how Ganga Ma came to plunge from her course across the night sky as the Milky Way, with her fall broken and channelled through the tangled locks of the god Shiva, in order to glide to earth bringing liberation to humanity as the mother river of India. The Mahabharata portrays the Ganga as the source of the divine power of life, nourishing and purifying on the one hand and destructive on the other.

Since the numen of the Ganga is not limited to the Ganga alone but extends in greater or lesser degree to all the waters of India, we have included Anne Feldhaus's 'The Descent of the Gaṅgā' and A.K. Ramanujan's translation of the Kannada poem 'A Pond Named Ganga' by Chandrashekhar Kambar. In the former, a tale from the *Gautamī Māhātmya* is related in which the

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Godavari River is revealed to be the southern branch of the Ganga and, in the latter, even a village pool is a manifestation of Ganga Ma.

Kambar's poem also serves as a bridge to the spirit of devotion (*bhakti*) that plays such an essential role in the contemporary place of Ganga Ma in the religious experience of very large numbers of Hindus. This spirit of *bhakti* directed toward the Ganga is exemplified by a story told to illustrate a popular collection of devotional songs available in the bazaars of northern India. The story goes like this:

> *Prince Rama, the supreme being incarnate, his brother Lakshmana and his wife Sita, are wandering in exile from their homeland. They arrive at the bank of the River Ganga. Wishing to cross the river, Lord Rama asks the boatman Kevat, who is of low caste, to ferry them across to the other side. To Rama's surprise Kevat refuses to do this unless Rama will first allow him to wash his feet with the holy water,* jal, *of the Ganga. Kevat explains his request by referring to the story of Ahalya, a woman who was cursed by a sage to turn to stone until she could be made a woman again through contact with the dust on the Lord's feet. In other words, Kevat is afraid that he will lose his livelihood when his boat, like the stone Ahalya, becomes a woman at the touch of Lord Rama's feet. Rama is pleased with Kevat's devotion and agrees to let him wash his feet. But when the boatman pours Ganga* jal *into a tub and prepares to wash Rama's feet, the water in the tub sings two songs in the Bhojpuri language:*

First:

> *Gangaji makes this request of the Lord:*
> *Looking again and again at the Lord's feet, she fixes her heart on them.*
> *Ganga, the touchstone, sings of her sorrows of many births*
> *And so forgets all of her suffering.*
> *She makes her request of the Lord while sobbing uncontrollably.*
> *Beholding the revitalizing beauty of the Lord,*
> *She satisfies her love.*

And then:

> *My fortune has awakened so that I have been able to see the Lord.*
> *Who knows how he has come to bestow his grace upon me?*
> *I have always been anxious to meet him,*
> *but I haven't been able to do so.*
> *Today I have received deliverance.*
> *O Lord, do not abandon me.*
> *I beg you with my hands folded in supplication:*
> *Keep me under the shelter of your land of Braj*[2] *and grant me your mercy.*

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The text continues:

> *Shocked at hearing Ganga Ma talking with Rama, Kevat drops his tub, runs some distance away and says:*
> *'Hey, what is this?*
> *Is the tub talking?*
> *Just what I was afraid of has happened—*
> *It sounds like honey bees are buzzing inside the tub*
> *But my eyes cannot see anything there.*
> *Tell me what is really the truth.'*
>
> *After washing the Lord's feet, Kevat drinks some of the Ganga* jal *and distributes the rest to the members of his family who gain great merit as a result.*[3]

The boatmen who tell this story say that after this encounter with Rama and the drinking of Ganga *jal*, their community could no longer be considered lowly. They had achieved liberation and were absolved of all their sins. Such stories accounting for the Ganga's transformative powers further blur the boundaries between the mythical and mundane, imbuing the lives of people with meaning and linking them intimately with the sacred river.

Historical accounts by European travellers reveal amazement and admiration for such a world in which spirituality and belief are intrinsically connected to the everyday in the lives of those who dwell along the river. These accounts record the tremendous variety of life on the Ganga—the types of boats to be found, the animal life in the water and along the banks, the exotic temples and other structures, and the lush vegetation beside the river—and also more mundane issues, such as the hairstyles of the boatmen and the taxes levied by local rulers for transporting goods and people across the river.

During the colonial period, the Ganga was the primary commercial and communication artery by which travellers, missionaries, and military personnel could advance from the Bay of Bengal up-country, leaving us with records of their impressions of the river, a tantalizing fraction of which is included in this anthology. Colonial perspectives, such as those found in James Fraser's narrative, Henry T. Bernstein's 'The Bengal Steam Department's Hindus and Muslims', Honoria Lawrence's 'Letter to a Friend', and E.B. Havell's 'On the Ganges' are underscored by asymmetrical relations of power between the colonial rulers and their subject populations. Such power relations partly relied on an Orientalist discourse in which India was seen as a country frozen in time where one could readily view the exotic, 'irrational and superstitious'

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practices of the 'natives'. Writing from the period also reveals the anxiety felt by travellers in the face of the threat of robberies committed by thugs, dacoits, and other 'predatory' castes on the river and its branches.[4] The Iranian scholar, Ahmad Behbahani (d.1819), experiences such an assault. His narrative otherwise contrasts with those of the colonists as he focuses on the origin and ancestry of Muslim communities and the location of Muslim shrines and mosques.

For the British East India Company, the river was a major trading route and, therefore, had to be purged of all European competitors. In evidence given to the House of Lords in 1813, Major-General Alexander Kyd sought to alleviate some of the Lords committee's concerns:

> I do not think that Europeans could with much ease conceal themselves in boats in going up the Ganges; there is a very strict river police established on the Ganges, in the first place, to guard against the smuggling of opium from Patna, and also the smuggling of salt from Bengal; there are also guard boats at almost all the stations, to examine boats, to prevent Europeans going up; and if government chose to make that river police still stricter, I do not think that Europeans could possibly get up the Ganges without the permission of government.[5]

Controlling the Ganga was central to British trade and statecraft during the colonial period and required an unprecedented degree of documentation and disciplinary measures to manage and administer land and people.

The river basin is now home to millions of people who depend on it for their livelihoods and who structure their daily lives around it. How does this river run through the lives of people inhabiting the subcontinent? The mythic, spiritual and benevolent side of Mother Ganga has nurtured and inspired some of India's greatest writings and legends. On the other hand, many of the stories, poems, and essays written about the river reveal the everyday struggles and frustrations that fisherfolk, villagers, pilgrims, and other common people living on and around her shores encounter when faced with the hardships and injustices wrought by floods and displacement, development, urbanization, and industrialization. Indeed, the reality of everyday life is often much less dignified than that portrayed in the mythical imagination. Adwaita Mallabarman's novel, *A River Called Titash*, captures the contrast between the natural beauty of the river and the harsh and sometimes tragic lives of the peasants and fisherfolk who live on its banks. The Ganga's descent from the Himalayan mountaintops to the Bay of Bengal, evocatively portrayed in Raj Kapoor's classic film *Rām Terī Gangā Mailī* ('Ram your Ganga is dirty') is a powerful reminder of the river's deleterious journey. While such degradation

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has not compromised the Ganga's identity and sanctity among the believers, it has severely strained the living relationship that these people have with the river.

The anthology concludes with some recent scholarship that aims to deliver insights into contemporary life on and around the Ganga and in particular to demonstrate the processes of change and adaptation occurring at the juncture of modernity and tradition.

The pressing issue of pollution in the Ganga is never far from the limelight, a shadow cast over the sacred glow, but, as Kelly Alley shows, such pollution does not necessarily compromise the efficacy of Ganga's water as a purifying agent.

Our modest attempt to compile an anthology of primarily English writings on the Ganga from the vast range of material available is necessarily partial and limited. Ganga's mythical, material, and spiritual dimensions render it impossible to merely sketch the river's geographical boundaries, which perplex even the most imaginative of cartographers. Nevertheless, we have selected writing that flows the length of the river from its source to its delta, where some of its many branches are so large that they have names of their own, such as Padma and Meghna. The river not only has altered its course over time, deserting some towns while remaining loyal to others, but Ganga is also to be found in far away lands, extending beyond the black water (*kala pani*). Ganga has been carried in the minds and on the tongues of its ardent devotees; many migrants still revere it and continue to seek its oversight and protection. For instance, in Mauritius, pilgrims have been performing rituals in the mountaintop lake called 'Ganga Talao' for generations.[6] More recently, in 2001 the then Indian prime minister, Atal Bihari Vajpayee carried a vessel of Ganga *jal* with him to Indonesia, ceremoniously presenting the sacred water to the governor of the predominantly Hindu island of Bali.

The purifying and spiritual qualities of Ganga Ma draw pilgrims and worshippers to her banks to bathe in and sip her waters. So that those waters may be available not just at one time and for themselves alone, many of those pilgrims bring containers large and small made of brass, glass, or plastic to fill with Ganga *jal* to take home. There the sacred *jal* can be used in the performance of rituals, in the healing of the frail and infirm, and to sanctify more mundane water. In all these varieties of usage the Ganga water defies space and time, flowing as at a ford (*tīrtha*) between this world and the transcendent, releasing the devout from the bonds of rebirth to arrive at the distant shore of liberation.

An Anthology of Writings on the Ganga reflects the three levels—material, spiritual, and divine—at which the Ganga can be perceived according to

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Vallabha at the same time that it follows Vyasa in reflecting the dialogue and tension between the modern and the traditional, the historic and the mythical, the epic and the everyday, the factual and the fictitious. The book brings together various perspectives on the river, demonstrating the wide-ranging views, interests, experiences, practices, and emotions generated from the encounter between people, both individuals and groups, and the Ganga. Above all, we intend the anthology to offer an insight into the broader organization, quality, character, and diversity of Indian culture and society.

Assa Doron
Richard Barz
Barbara Nelson

Note on editorial style: As our sources come from a range of time periods, genres, and disciplines, we have not attempted to impose any standardization on place names, spelling, and transliteration. We have attempted to retain the character of the original sources. As far as possible, the extracts are presented as they appear in the original: spelling, diacritics, capitalization, italics, punctuation, inconsistencies, and referencing styles appear as they do in the original.

Notes

1. Vallabhācārya, *Siddhāntamuktāvalī*, in *Ṣoḍaśagranthaḥ*, vol. 1, Nathdwara: Śrīgovindlāljī Mahārāj, 1979, pp. 24–5.

2. Here the hymn conflates Braj, the land of the god Krishna, with Rama's kingdom of Ayodhya.

3. Verses translated from original in *Kevat Anurag* [booklet in Hindi and Bhojpuri], Patna: Narayan, n.d.

4. See Assa Doron, *Caste, Occupation, and Politics on the Ganges: Passages of Resistance*, Aldershot; Burlington: Ashgate, 2008.

5. *Minutes of evidence taken before...the Lords Committees ... as relates to the charter of the East India Company ...*, London, 1813, p. 121.

6. Patrick Eisenlohr, 'The Shivratri Pilgrimage', in *Little India: Diaspora, Time, and Ethnolinguistic Belonging in Hindu Mauritius*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006, pp. 245–51.

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THE EPIC AND NUMINOUS

The Descent of the Ganga

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The Rāmāyaṇa of Vālmīki

Bālakāṇḍa

Sarga 37

1. When Kauśika finished telling Rāma Kākutstha this sweet-syllabled tale, he addressed him further:

2. 'Long ago there was a heroic and righteous king named Sagara, ruler of Ayodhyā. He was childless, although he desired children.

3. 'Rāma, the elder wife of Sagara, whose name was Keśinī, was the righteous and truthful daughter of the king of Vidarbha.

4. 'Sagara's second wife was Ariṣṭanemi's daughter, Sumati. In beauty she had no rival on earth.

5. 'Once the king went to the Himalayas, and there he and his two wives performed austerities on Mount Bhṛguprasravaṇa.

6. 'When a full one hundred years had passed, the sage Bhṛgu, foremost among the truthful, was pleased with Sagara's austerities and granted him a boon.

7. '"Blameless man," he said, "you will get huge numbers of children. What is more, bull among men, you will achieve fame unrivaled in this world.

8. '"My son, one of your wives shall give birth to a son who will carry on your dynasty. The other will bear sixty thousand sons."

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9. 'The two wives of the king were greatly delighted, and cupping their hands in reverence, they propitiated that tiger among men as he spoke to them, saying:

10. '"Which one of us will have the one son, brahman? Which one will give birth to many? Brahman, we want to know. May your words prove true."

11. 'Hearing these words, the extremely righteous Bhṛgu made this excellent reply, "You may arrange it between yourselves.

12. '"One son to carry on the dynasty or many sons mighty, vigorous, and renowned—which of you wants which boon?"

13. 'Now when Keśinī heard the sage's words, Rāma, delight of the Raghus, she chose, right there in the presence of the king, the son who would carry on the dynasty.

14. 'But Sumati, Suparṇa's sister, chose sixty thousand vigorous and renowned sons.

15. 'Delight of the Raghus, the king then walked reverently around the seer. Then, bowing his head in homage, he returned to his own city with his wives.

16. 'So, after some time had elapsed, Keśinī, the elder, gave birth to Sagara's son, who was called Asamañja.

17. 'But as for Sumati, tiger among men, she gave birth to a gourd-like fetal mass. When the gourd was split, sixty thousand sons emerged.

18. 'Nurses nurtured them in pots filled with clarified butter, and after a long time, they grew to young manhood.

19. 'Indeed, it was a very long time before Sagara's sixty thousand sons grew into their young manhood and beauty.

20. 'But, best of men, delight of the Raghus, the eldest son of Sagara took to forcibly seizing children and throwing them into the waters of the Sarayū, laughing as he watched them drown.

21. 'Since he was bent on doing such mischief to the people, his father banished him from the city.

22. 'But Asamañja had a mighty son named Aṃśumant, who spoke kindly to everyone and was well liked by all the people.

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23. 'After some time, best of men, Sagara had an idea and formed a resolution, saying, "I will perform a sacrifice."

24. 'Then, when the king, learned in the *vedas*, had come to this decision to perform a sacrifice in consultation with his host of preceptors, he began the ritual.'

The end of the thirty-seventh *sarga* of the *Bālakāṇḍa of the Śrī Rāmāyaṇa.*

Sarga 38

1. When Viśvāmitra's story was at an end, Rāma, delight of the Raghus, spoke in delight to the sage who shone like fire.

2. 'Bless you, brahman, I would like to hear this story too in great detail. How did my ancestor carry out his sacrifice?'

3. Gently smiling, Viśvāmitra once more addressed Kākutstha, 'Rāma, you shall now hear the whole story of great Sagara.

4. 'Himavant, greatest of mountains and father-in-law of Śaṅkara, stands confronting the Vindhya range. The two, in fact, directly face each other.

5. 'Best of men, tiger among men, the sacrifice took place between these two ranges, for it is said that this is the best region for sacrificial rites.

6. 'Kākutstha, my son, Aṃśumant, equipped with a strong bow and a great chariot, acting on Sagara's instructions, guarded the sacrificial horse.

7. 'But, even though Sagara himself was the patron of the rite, Indra Vāsava, taking on the form of a *rākṣasa*, carried off the sacrificial horse in an instant.

8. 'Now, as the great man's horse was being stolen, Kākutstha, all his hosts of preceptors spoke to him, the patron of the rite.

9. '"At this very moment, your sacrificial horse is being taken away by force. You must kill the thief, Kākutstha, and bring back the horse.

10. '"For this is a defect in the sacrifice that will bring disaster to us all. Your majesty, you must see to it that this defect is made good."

11. 'When the king heard the words spoken by his preceptors in the assembly, he addressed these words to his sixty thousand sons:

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12. '"My sons, bulls among men, I do not see how *rākṣasas* could have done this, for this great rite is being carried out by illustrious sages, sanctified by the sacred utterances of the *vedas*.

13. '"Therefore, my sons, you must go and seek the horse. May good fortune attend you. Follow its trail over all the ocean-garlanded earth.

14. '"Search carefully, my sons, league by league.

15. '"In searching for the horse thief, at my command, you must dig up the very earth itself until you find the horse.

16. '"Bless you. I am in a state of consecration. Therefore, I must wait here with my grandson and my preceptors until the horse is found."

17. 'When they had been addressed in this manner, Rāma, the king's mighty sons were delighted and roamed the earth carrying out their father's orders.

18. 'Tiger among men, with arms as hard as adamant, they each tore up the earth for a league on every side.

19. 'Torn up with spears like bolts of lightning and with fearsome plows, the earth cried out, delight of the Raghus.

20. 'Rāghava, there was an unbearable outcry of creatures being killed—of *nāgas*, *asuras*, and *rākṣasas*.

21. 'Delight of the Raghus, those heroes tore up the earth to a distance of sixty thousand leagues, all the way down to the splendid underworld, Rasātala.

22. 'In this fashion, tiger among men, the king's sons roamed everywhere, digging up this mountain-studded continent of Jambudvīpa.

23. 'Then all the gods, *gandharvas*, *asuras*, and serpents, their minds reeling, approached Grandfather Brahmā.

24. 'Utterly terrified, their faces downcast, they propitiated the great Grandfather, addressing these words to him.

25. '"O lord, the sons of Sagara are digging up the entire earth. Many great beings, as well as creatures of the waters, are being killed."

26. '"Crying, 'He has carried off the horse! He has ruined our sacrifice!' the sons of Sagara are slaughtering all creatures."'

The end of the thirty-eighth *sarga* of the *Bālakāṇḍa* of the *Śrī Rāmāyaṇa*.

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Sarga 39

1. 'When the holy lord, Grandfather Brahmā, heard the words of the gods, who were terrified and bewildered by the might of those destructive men, he replied to them:

2. '"Wise Vāsudeva to whom this whole earth belongs has assumed the form of Kapila and ever upholds the earth.

3. '"This tearing up of the earth was foreseen as necessary. So also was the destruction of Sagara's short-lived sons."

4. 'Hearing the Grandfather's words, the thirty-three foe-conquering gods were greatly delighted and departed as they had come.

5. 'Then as Sagara's great sons continued tearing up the earth, there arose a noise like that of an earthquake.

6. 'When they had split open the entire earth and walked reverently around the whole of it, all the sons of Sagara together addressed these words to their father:

7. '"We have gone over the entire earth and have slain many powerful beings, gods, *dānavas, rākṣasas, piśācas*, serpents, and *kinnaras*.

8. '"Yet we have found neither the horse nor the horse thief. What shall we do? Bless you, think of a plan."

9. 'Hearing such words from his sons, delight of the Raghus, great King Sagara replied to them in anger:

10. '"Dig further, bless you. Tear up the earth. Come back when you have accomplished your mission and found the horse thief."

11. 'Acting upon their father's words, the sixty thousand sons of great Sagara rushed back to Rasātala.

12. 'Digging down from there, they saw Virūpākṣa, one of the mountainous elephants who support the earth, bearing his burden.

13. 'Delight of the Raghus, that great elephant Virūpākṣa supports the entire earth, with its mountains and forests, on his head.

14. 'So whenever that great elephant shakes his head for a moment to relieve his weariness, there is an earthquake.

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15. 'When they had walked reverently around the great elephant, the guardian of the East, and done him honor, they went on tearing up Rasātala.

16–17. 'After tearing up the East, they went on and tore up the South. In the South, they saw another great elephant, mighty Mahāpadma, who, like a huge mountain, supports the earth on his head. It filled them with the greatest wonder.

18. 'But, when the sixty thousand sons of Sagara had walked reverently around him, they tore up the West.

19. 'In the West, too, those mighty men saw a great and mountainous elephant, Saumanasa, one of the elephants who support the earth.

20. 'They walked around him reverently and inquired about his well-being, then went on digging up the North.

21. 'In the North, best of the Raghus, they saw snow-white Bhadra, who supported the earth with his splendid body.

22. 'Those sixty thousand sons touched him, and after walking around him reverently, tore up the earth once more.

23. 'Finally, all the sons of Sagara went to the famous northeastern quarter and dug up the earth in their fury.

24. 'And it was there that they saw the eternal Vāsudeva in the form of Kapila and grazing near the god, the horse.

25. 'Thinking him to be the one who had ruined their sacrifice, they were enraged, and they ran toward him, eyes clouded with anger, crying, "Stop! Stop!"

26. '"You are the one who stole our sacrificial horse. Fool! Know that we, the sons of Sagara, have come!"

27. 'When Kapila heard these words, delight of the Raghus, he was filled with great fury and uttered the syllable "*Hum.*"

28. 'Thereupon, Kākutstha, all the sons of Sagara were reduced to a heap of ashes by the great and unfathomable Kapila.'

The end of the thirty-ninth *sarga* of the *Bālakāṇḍa* of the *Śrī Rāmāyaṇa.*

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Sarga 40

1. 'When, delight of the Raghus, King Sagara realized that his sons had been gone for a very long time, he spoke to his grandson, who shone with an inner splendor.

2. '"You are a hero accomplished in the arts of war and equal to your forefathers in power. Go then and seek out the path of your forefathers, the path by which the horse was taken.

3. '"The creatures that live underground are huge and powerful, so you must take your bow and a sword to ward them off.

4. '"Pay homage to those who deserve homage and kill those who would obstruct you. Then, when you have accomplished your mission, come back and complete my sacrifice."

5. 'When Aṃśumant had been thus fittingly addressed by the great Sagara, he took his bow and sword and departed, striding swiftly.

6. 'At the behest of the king, best of men, he set out on the subterranean path that had been excavated by his great forefathers.

7. 'There that mighty man saw one of the elephants who support the earth. It was being worshipped by *daityas*, *dānavas*, *rākṣasas*, *piśācas*, and the great birds and serpents.

8. 'After he had walked around it reverently, he inquired as to its well-being, asking also about his forefathers and the horse thief.

9. 'When the elephant heard Aṃśumant's words, it replied affectionately, "Son of Asamañja, you shall quickly accomplish your mission and return with the horse."

10. 'Hearing these words, he set out to question all the elephants who support the earth, in the proper manner and sequence.

11. 'All those guardians of the directions, who understood the subtleties of speech and were themselves eloquent, honored and encouraged him, saying, "You shall return with the horse."

12. 'Having heard these words, he strode swiftly to where his forefathers, the sons of Sagara, had been turned to heaps of ash.

13. 'Then the son of Asamañja was overcome by grief. Deeply grieved over their death, he cried out in his great sorrow.

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14. 'Overwhelmed by grief and sorrow, that tiger among men saw the sacrificial horse grazing nearby.

15. 'The mighty man wished to perform the funerary libations for the king's sons, but though he searched for water, he found no pool or stream.

16. 'But, casting about his sharp eye, Rāma, he spied his forefathers' uncle, the king of birds, Suparṇa, rival of the wind.

17. 'And the bird, mighty Vainateya, said these words to him, "Do not grieve, tiger among men. This slaughter took place for the good of the world.

18. '"And since, wise man, these mighty men were consumed by none other than unfathomable Kapila, you should not offer them the water of this world.

19. '"Bull among men, the Ganges is the eldest daughter of Himalaya. It is she alone, the purifier of the world, who should purify these men now turned to heaps of ash.

20. '"When their ashes are moistened by the Ganges, beloved of all the world, my son, only then will the sixty thousand princes be carried to heaven.

21. '"Illustrious bull among men, take the horse and go. For, hero, you must complete your grandfather's sacrifice."

22. 'Hearing Suparṇa's words, the renowned and mighty Aṃśumant took the horse and returned home swiftly.

23. 'He came before the king, delight of the Raghus, who was still in a state of consecration. He told him all that had happened, just as it had taken place, and repeated Suparṇa's words.

24. 'Hearing the dreadful words of Aṃśumant, the king completed his sacrifice in due order, according to the ritual injunctions.

25. 'But when the majestic lord of the earth, the king, had completed the sacrifice and returned to his capital, he could think of no plan to bring down the Ganges.

26. 'Finally, after a very long time, the great king, who had reigned for thirty thousand years, went to heaven still without having thought of a plan.'

The end of the fortieth *sarga* of the *Bālakāṇḍa* of the *Śrī Rāmāyaṇa.*

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Sarga 41

1. 'When Sagara had succumbed to the law of time, Rāma, his ministers made righteous Aṃśumant their king.

2. 'Aṃśumant was a very great king, delight of the Raghus, and he had a great son famed as Dilīpa.

3. 'Turning the kingdom over to Dilīpa, delight of the Raghus, he performed very severe austerities on a lovely peak in the Himalayas.

4. 'After living in an ascetics' grove for thirty-two thousand years, the renowned ascetic King Aṃśumant at last attained heaven.

5. 'Mighty Dilīpa, too, hearing about the slaughter of his grandfathers, found his thoughts so scattered by grief that he also was unable to arrive at a solution.

6. 'He brooded about it constantly, wondering, "How can I bring down the Ganges? How can I perform their funerary libations? How can I save them?"

7. 'Thus, the king, celebrated for his righteousness, constantly brooded, and in time, a most righteous son named Bhagīratha was born to him.

8. 'Mighty King Dilīpa performed many sacrifices and reigned for thirty thousand years.

9. 'Yet, even so, tiger among men, he could think of no way to save his ancestors. At last he took ill and succumbed to the law of time.

10. 'After first consecrating his son Bhagīratha as king, that bull among men, the king, went to Indra's world by virtue of the merit he had acquired for himself through his deeds.

11. 'Now the righteous and mighty royal seer Bhagīratha had no children, delight of the Raghus. So, lacking an heir, he wished to have one.

12. 'For this reason, delight of the Raghus, he undertook protracted austerities on Gokarṇa. Keeping his arms continually raised, eating but once a month, and controlling his senses, he practiced the austerity of the five fires.

13. 'After he had practiced such awesome asceticism for a thousand years, Lord Brahmā, supreme lord and master of all creatures, was greatly pleased.

14. 'Accompanied by the hosts of gods, Grandfather Brahmā approached great Bhagīratha, still immersed in his austerities, and said:

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15. '"Illustrious Bhagīratha, lord of the people, I am pleased with these austerities you have performed so well. You have been true to your vows and so may choose a boon."

16. 'The illustrious and mighty Bhagīratha stood cupping his hands in reverence and spoke to Brahmā, grandfather of all the worlds:

17. '"If you are pleased with me, lord, and if I am to have some reward for my austerities, then let me be the one to offer the funerary libations to all the sons of Sagara.

18. '"Let the ashes of those great men, my great-grandfathers, be moistened by the waters of the Ganges, so that they may reach heaven at last.

19. '"O god, grant me also children so that our line shall never fail. O god, let this be my second boon on behalf of the House of Ikṣvāku."

20. 'When the king had delivered this speech, the grandfather of all the worlds replied to him in fine words, both sweet and sweetly spoken:

21. '"Bhagīratha of the great chariot, this noble wish of yours shall come true. Bless you, you shall continue the Ikṣvāku line."

22. '"Haimavatī, the Ganges, is the eldest daughter of the Himalaya. Your majesty, Hara shall be charged with checking her fall.

23. '"For, your majesty, the earth would not be able to withstand the force of the Ganges' fall. Hero, I know of no one other than Śiva, the trident bearer, who could check her fall."

24. 'When the god, creator of the world, had addressed the king in this fashion, he spoke to the Ganges, and then went to heaven with all the Marut hosts.'

The end of the forty-first *sarga* of the *Bālakāṇḍa* of the *Śrī Rāmāyaṇa.*

Sarga 42

1. 'When the god of gods had gone, Rāma, Bhagīratha stood for a year on the tip of one big toe, worshiping Śiva.

2. 'At the end of that year, Śiva, the lord of creatures and husband of Umā, worshiped by all the worlds, said this to the king:

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3. '"Best of men, I am pleased with you and will do what you desire. I shall bear the daughter of the mountain king on my head."

4. 'And so, Rāma, the elder Haimavatī, worshiped by all the worlds, then took on an extremely powerful form and plunged from the sky with irresistible force onto Śiva's gracious head.

5. 'But confused by the coils of his matted hair, she could not find her way out; and so the goddess wandered about in there for a great many years.

6. 'Hara was immensely pleased by this, delight of the Raghus, and so he released the Ganges into Lake Bindu.

7. 'In this way she came down from the sky onto Śaṅkara's head, and from there to the earth, her waters rushing down with a terrible roar.

8. 'And, as she fell to earth from the sky, the gods, seers, *gandharvas*, *yakṣas*, and hosts of perfected beings looked on.

9. 'Even the gods, gathered there in their flying chariots, huge as cities, with their horses and splendid elephants, were awed.

10. 'Thus did the hosts of immeasurably powerful gods assemble in their desire to see that greatest of marvels, the mighty fall of the Ganges.

11. 'The cloudless sky was shining with the hosts of hastening gods and the splendor of their ornaments, so that it seemed illumined by a hundred suns.

12. 'Filled with masses of twisting snakes, crocodiles, and fish, the sky seemed shot with scattered lightning.

13. 'Now white with a thousand shreds of flying foam and flocks of snowy geese, the sky seemed suddenly filled with autumn clouds.

14. 'At some points the river flowed swiftly, at others slowly. In some places it moved tortuously or broadened out; at others, it narrowed and sank between its banks only to rise again elsewhere.

15. 'Here and there the water dashed back upon itself, momentarily hurled up into the air, only to fall to earth once more.

16. 'The water fell first upon Śaṅkara's head, and only then to earth. Therefore it shone, for it was pure and able to wash away all sin.

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17. 'Then thinking, "Water fallen from Bhava's body is holy," the *gandharvas* and the hosts of seers bathed there with those who dwelt on earth.

18. 'Even those who had fallen to earth from heaven through some curse were freed from all sin by bathing there.

19. 'Cleansed of their sins by that shining water, they flew up into the sky again and were restored to their proper worlds.

20. 'People were delighted by that shining water and joyfully bathed in the Ganges, freeing themselves from all weariness.

21. 'Then, as the royal seer, mighty Bhagīratha, mounted in a celestial chariot, drove on before, the Ganges followed along behind him.

22–23. 'Joyously following the Ganges, Rāma, all the gods, the hosts of seers, the *daityas*, *dānavas* and *rākṣasas*, the foremost of the *gandharvas* and *yakṣas*, the *kinnaras*, great serpents, and all the *apsarases* with all the creatures of the waters made a procession behind Bhagīratha's chariot.

24. 'Thus did the most excellent of rivers, the Ganges, who washes away all sins, follow in King Bhagīratha's train.'

The end of the forty-second *sarga* of the *Bālakāṇḍa* of the *Śrī Rāmāyaṇa.*

Sarga 43

1. 'Followed by the Ganges, the king proceeded to the ocean and entered that gaping hole in the earth where his ancestors had been turned to ashes.

2. 'And, when those ashes were flooded with water, Rāma, Brahmā, the lord of all the worlds, spoke to the king:

3. '"Tiger among men, the sixty thousand sons of great Sagara have been saved and like gods, have gone to heaven.

4. '"Your majesty, the sons of Sagara will remain in heaven like gods as long as the waters of the ocean remain in the world.

5. '"And the Ganges will be your eldest daughter. She too will remain in the world and will be known by a name that you shall give her.

6. '"For the Ganges, the river of the three paths, will be known as the celestial Bhāgīrathī. And because she sanctifies three courses, she will be known as the river of the three paths.

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7. '"Lord of men, you may perform here the funerary libation for all your forefathers. Fulfill your vow, your majesty.

8. '"Your majesty, your glorious ancestor Sagara, champion of righteousness, could not fulfill this cherished hope.

9. '"Nor was this vow fulfilled, my son, by Aṃśumant, though his power was unrivaled in this world and he strove to bring the Ganges down.

10–11. '"Then there was your father, the mighty royal seer Dilīpa, whose power was equal to that of a great seer and whose austerity was equal to mine. But, blameless and illustrious man, even he, so steadfast in the duty of a kshatriya, could not, though he too strove to do so, think of a way to bring down the Ganges.

12. '"But you have fulfilled this vow, bull among men. You have won the highest and most coveted glory in the world.

13. '"And, foe-conquering hero, by bringing down the Ganges, you have earned the great abode of righteousness.

14. '"Bathe yourself in these waters, best of men, for bathing here is always purifying. Purify yourself, tiger among men, and now achieve the holy purpose of your quest.

15. '"Make the funerary libations for all your forefathers. Farewell, I shall go to my own world. You may depart, your majesty."

16. 'Having spoken in this fashion, the lord of gods, the glorious grandfather of all worlds, departed for the world of the gods just as he had come.

17. 'Then the glorious king and royal seer, Bhagīratha, made magnificent funerary libations to the sons of Sagara in due order and according to the ritual injunctions. At last, once more bathing and purifying himself, he returned to his own city.

18. 'Having thus accomplished his purpose, best of men, he once more ruled his kingdom. His people, too, rejoiced, Rāghava. For, in regaining their king, they too had accomplished their goal and were freed from all sorrow and anxiety.

19. 'And now I have told you the entire history of the Ganges, Rāma. Bless you and may fortune smile upon you. But see, the time for our evening devotions is slipping away.

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20. 'The tale I have just told you, 'The Descent of the Ganges,' brings one wealth, fame, long life, heaven, and even sons.'

The end of the forty-third *sarga* of the *Bālakāṇḍa* of the *Śrī Rāmāyaṇa.*

Sarga 44

1. 'When Rāghava, seated there with Lakṣmaṇa, heard Viśvāmitra's words, he was amazed and said to him:

2. 'Brahman, this excellent tale you have told, the tale of the holy descent of the Ganges and the filling of the ocean, is truly wonderful.'

3. And, as he sat with Saumitri in contemplation of Viśvāmitra's marvelous tale, the whole night slipped away.

4. Then, in the clear light of dawn, foe-conquering Rāghava said these words to the great sage Viśvāmitra, who had already performed his daily devotions:

5. 'The holy goddess Night has gone and we have heard something well worth hearing. Mighty ascetic, in my careful contemplation of your story, the whole night passed for me as though it were but a moment.

6. 'Now let us cross this best of streams, the holy river of the three paths. Here is a boat with comfortable seats that belongs to the seers of holy deeds. Realizing that so holy a man as you had come, they must have sent it in haste.'

7. When Viśvāmitra heard great Rāghava's words, he made the crossing with a group of seers and the two Rāghavas.

8. Reaching the northern bank, they paid homage to the host of seers and, once landed on the Ganges' bank, they beheld the city of Viśālā.

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The Mahābhārata

Vaiśaṃpāyana said:

There once was a king of the name of Mahābhiṣa, a lord of the earth who sprang from the dynasty of Ikṣvāku, true in his promises and of proven prowess. With a thousand Horse Sacrifices and a hundred Horse Race Festivals he satisfied the lord of the Gods, and so the king attained to heaven.

One day the Gods waited on Brahmā. The royal seers were there, and so was King Mahābhiṣa. Then the Ganges, greatest of rivers, came to pay court to the Grandfather. The wind blew up her skirt, which was white like the light of the moon, and the throngs of the Gods immediately lowered their faces. But King Mahābhiṣa looked at the river fearlessly. Mahābhiṣa earned the contempt of the blessed Lord Brahmā, who said, 'You shall be born among the mortals and once more attain to the worlds.'

The king thereupon reflected upon all the kings and ascetics and then chose the many-splendored Pratīpa for his father. The river goddess, on seeing the king lose his composure, went away musing about him in her heart. As she went on her way, she spied the celestial Vasus, crestfallen, their puissance darkened by despair. Seeing them in such a state, the river goddess asked, 'Why are you looking so lost? Is there no safety for celestials?' The divine Vasus said, 'Great river, we made a small mistake and for that the great-spirited Vasiṣṭha cursed us vehemently! We foolishly passed by that strict seer Vasiṣṭha when he was sitting at his twilight rites hidden from our eyes. He cursed us angrily, "Be born in a womb!" And what that scholar of the *Veda* pronounces cannot be undone. Therefore, become you a human woman on earth and bear the Vasus as your sons. We cannot enter a human womb which is not pure.' The Ganges consented and said to the Vasus, 'What eminent man among mortals shall be your begetter?'

The Vasus said:

A law-minded king, Śaṃtanu by name, will be born in the world of mortals as the son of Pratīpa. He shall be our begetter.

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The Ganges said:

That, was in my mind too, flawless Gods, precisely so. I shall do him a kindness and so fulfill your desire.

The Vasus said:

You must throw your sons in the water when they have been born, so that, O Goddess who walks in three worlds, our atonement will not last too long.

The Ganges said:

I shall do so, but let him have one son, so his lying with me for a son will not remain fruitless.

The Vasus said:

We shall each of us spare you one-eighth of the sperm, and from that sperm the son that you and he desire shall be born. But he shall beget no offspring among the mortals. Therefore your son will remain sonless, for all his virility.

Vaiśaṃpāyana said:

Thus the Vasus made a covenant with the Ganges, and with happy hearts they hastened on their intended way.

Vaiśaṃpāyana said:

There was King Pratīpa who was devoted to the well-being of all creatures. For many years he sat on the bank of the river Ganges, muttering his prayers. The Ganges assumed the form of a woman who had all the virtues of beauty and most seducingly she rose from the water like Śrī incarnate. As the royal seer sat astudying, the spirited, divinely beautiful Goddess of the lovely face sat on his right thigh, which was sturdy like a *śāla* trunk. King Pratīpa said to the spirited woman, 'What can I do for you, my beautiful? What favor do you wish?'

The woman said:

I want you, king, lord of the Kuṛus—make love to me! For the strict do not countenance the rejection of a woman who is in love.

Pratīpa said:

Beautiful woman, I will not lust after the wives of other men or women who are not of my station. That, you must know, is the vow I have sworn by the Law.

The woman said:

I am not unfavored or forbidden or notorious! I am a beautiful celestial virgin! Love me, king, as I love you.

Pratīpa said:

I refuse the favor you urge from me. Otherwise my breaking of the Law will destroy me—I swore a vow! You embrace me while sitting on my right

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thigh, beautiful woman, but that is the place to sit for children and daughters-in-law, shy girl. The share of a mistress is on the left, but you have avoided that side. Therefore I cannot pleasure you. Become my daughter-in-law, my lovely; I choose you for my son! For you, my buxom girl, came and took the side of the daughter-in-law.

The woman said:

You know the Law—then so shall it be. I shall be united with your son. But it is for my love of you that I shall love the famous lineage of the Bhāratas. However many kings there are on earth, your dynasty is their refuge. Centuries will expire before I have counted the virtues that are famed of this dynasty—its goodness is peerless!

He must not know of my high birth, and whatever I do your son should never question. Living with your son in this way I shall prosper his pleasure; and for his sons, his merits, and favors he shall attain to heaven.

Vaiśaṃpāyana said:

He consented, O king, and she disappeared in the river. And as he waited for his son to be born, the king kept the promise in mind.

In the meantime, Pratīpa, bull of the barons, and his wife performed acts of austerity to obtain a son, O scion of the Kurus; and though they were old, a son was born to them—Mahābhiṣa. Since he was born the issue of a serene man he was called Śaṃtanu; and remembering the imperishable worlds he had conquered with his own acts, Śaṃtanu, O strictest of the Kurus, became a man of good deeds.

When his son Śaṃtanu had grown to manhood, Pratīpa instructed him: 'Once a woman approached me for your sake, Śaṃtanu. If that same beautiful woman comes to you in secret, son, a celestial woman of great loveliness, and she seeks love to bear you sons, you must not question her about who she is or whose she is; and if she does anything, you must not question her, blameless son, but love her as she loves you, at my behest,' he said to him.

King Pratīpa, thus having instructed his son Śaṃtanu, anointed him king in his own realm and entered the forest. This new king, wise Śaṃtanu, a famous archer on earth, became an ardent hunter who forever ranged the forest. Once, while laying low deer and buffalo, the strict king followed by himself the course of the river Ganges, which is sought out by Siddhas and Cāraṇas. And there he saw one day a beautiful woman who fairly blazed with loveliness, like Śrī the lotus goddess come to earth. Her body was flawless, her teeth impeccable, and celestial ornaments adorned her. She was alone, wearing a sheer skirt; and she shone like the calyx of a lotus. When he saw her, he

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shivered, astounded by the perfection of her shape; and this overlord of men could not cease drinking her with his eyes.

And she, as soon as she had spied the splendid king on his wanderings, could not cease watching him wantonly, and love brought fondness to her heart. Then the king spoke to her, coaxing her with a gentle voice: 'Art thou a Goddess, or a maiden of the Dānavas or Gandharvas, or perchance an Apsarā? Or art thou a Yakṣī, or a Snake sprite, or a mortal woman, slim-waisted lady? Whoever thou art that appearest like the child of a God, be my wife, my beautiful!'

Hearing the king's soft and sweet and smiling word, she remembered the covenant of the Vasus and approached him innocently. And gladdening with her words the heart of the king, she said to him, 'I shall be your obedient queen, O lord of the earth. But if perhaps I do something, whether it pleases or displeases you, O king, I must never be stopped nor harshly spoken to. If you will act thus I shall live with you, sire. But once you stop me or scold me, I shall surely forsake you.'

'So shall it be!' he replied, O strictest of Bhāratas; and with this great king she found joy beyond compare. And Śaṃtanu, having found her, enjoyed her as he pleased, restraining himself and bearing in mind that she was not to be questioned. The lord of the land became content with the manner of her behavior, the perfection of her beauty, and with her secret ministrations. And the divinely lovely Goddess herself, Gangā the river who travels her three journeys, in the lustrously human form she had assumed became the obedient wife of a man whose love ripened with his fortunes—Śaṃtanu, lion-like king whose majesty matched Indra's might. With the skills of consummate love that were waited on by gentle words and affections she made the king love her; and he loved as she did. And so immersed was the king in his pleasure, and so carried away by the talents of this superb woman, that he was not aware of how many years, or seasons, or months, were passing by. While the lord of men made love to her as the spirit seized them, he begot on her eight sons who resembled immortals. And each son as soon as he was born she threw into the water; and saying 'I do you a favor,' she drowned each in the river Ganges. It did not please King Śaṃtanu, but he dared not say a word lest she forsake him.

Then when the eighth son was born, she seemed to be laughing, and the king, who yearned for a son of his own, was grief-stricken and said to her, 'Don't kill him! Who are you and whose? Why do you kill your sons? Do not incur the grave sin of infanticide! Stop, evil woman!'

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The woman said:

Good father, so desirous of sons, I shall not kill your son. But my sojourn is now worn out, for the covenant has been carried out. I am the Ganges, daughter of Jahnu, cherished by the hosts of the great seers! It was to accomplish a purpose of the Gods that I have lived with you. They were the eight Vasus of great fortune and might, these sons, who had become mortals by a curse of Vasiṣṭha. There is no begetter like you on earth, and no mortal nurse can be found in this world the like of me, hence I became a mortal to be their mother. By fathering the eight Vasus you have won the imperishable worlds. Such was the covenant of the divine Vasus that they concluded with me; I was to deliver each from his human birth as soon as he was born. Thus they were freed from the curse of the great-spirited Āpava. Let all be well with you—I must go. Protect your son who shall be great in his vows. My temporary sojourn here was in the midst of the Vasus: know that this son is my issue, Gangādatta, Gift-of-the-Ganges!

Śaṃtanu said:

Who was this Āpava, and what wrong had the Vasus done that he cursed them to assume human form? And what has this boy Gangādatta done that he now must live among the mortals? The Vasus are sovereigns of all the world; then why were they born among men? Tell me this, daughter of Jahnu.

Vaiśaṃpāyana said:

At his word the Ganges replied to the king, she the divine daughter of Jahnu to her husband Śaṃtanu, bull among men: 'Varuṇa had once a son, O best of the Bhāratas, the famous hermit named Vasiṣṭha, who is also called Āpava. He had a holy hermitage on the slope of the king of mountains, Meru, which was peopled with herds of deer and flocks of birds and in all seasons abloom with flowers. There Vasiṣṭha did his mortifications, the great saint, in the forest where sweet roots and fruit and water were plentiful, best of the Bhāratas.

'Now there was a daughter of Dakṣa, Surabhi, who was very proud; and this Goddess, O bull among Bhāratas, gave birth to a cow, by Kaśyapa, for the good of the world, the great cow of all plenty. The law-minded Vasiṣṭha obtained this cow as his sacrificial milch cow. And this cow lived in that wilderness of ascetics that was peopled with hermits and grazed in the lovely and lawly woods without a fear.

'Then upon a time there came to this wood that Gods and divine seers visited all the divine Vasus headed by Pṛthu. They roamed with their wives all over the woods and made love in its lovely hills and groves. The slim-waisted wife of one of the Vasus, O prince who are Indra's peer, wandered in that

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woods and saw the cow, the great cow of all plenty, which belonged to the hermit Vasiṣṭha. She was filled with amazement by the perfection of its manner and abundance, and she showed the cow to Dyaus, O lord with the eyes of a bull, this well-fed, well-yielding, well-tailed and well-faced shining cow that had all virtues and a manner beyond compare. Of such excellence was the cow that the joy-giving wife of the Vasu showed to the Vasu, O lord of kings, joy of the Pauravas.

'Thereupon, as soon as he saw that cow, O Indra-like, elephant-like king, Dyaus said to the Goddess, describing its beauties, "This lovely black-eyed cow belongs to Vasiṣṭha, my buxom, black-eyed Goddess, the seer who owns this lovely woods. A mortal who drinks its sweet milk, slim-waisted queen, will live ten thousand years without losing his youth." When the slim-waisted, flawlessly shaped Goddess heard this, O best of kings, she said to her husband of radiant luster, I have in the world of men a friend who is a princess, Jitāvatī is her name, a beautiful woman in the bloom of her youth. She is the daughter of a wise royal seer who is true to his vows, King Uśīnara, and she is famed in the world of men for her perfect beauty. I want this cow and its calf for her, blessed husband. Fetch it quickly, you best of immortals that prosper merit, so that my friend may drink its milk and be the only one, O giver of pride, among humankind who is free from age and disease. Pray do this for me, blessed and blameless husband, for no other kindness than this would be kinder to me!'

'Hearing this word of the Goddess, Dyaus, to do her a favor, carried off that cow with the help of his brothers who were headed by Pṛthu. Charged by the lotus-eyed Goddess, Dyaus was no longer able to reckon the awesome austerities of the seer, O king. So the cow was stolen, but his downfall because of it he failed to weigh. Then Varuṇa's son returned to his hermitage with fruit that he had gathered and did not find his cow and its calf in his beautiful forest. The ascetic started searching for it in the woods, but in spite of all his searching the lofty-minded hermit did not find it. Looking with his divine eye he saw that the cow had been abducted, and at once he was in the grip of his anger and cursed the Vasus: "Because the Vasus have stolen my well-tailed milch cow, therefore they shall all surely be born among men!" Thus did the blessed lord curse the Vasus, O bull among Bhāratas, that most strict hermit Āpava, who was seized by his fury. And having cursed them the blessed man set his mind on mortifications.'

'It was thus, sire, that the ascetic and brahminic seer of much might cursed in his wrath the eight divine Vasus. Then the great-spirited Gods

74362

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returned to his hermitage and, knowing that they had been cursed, approached the seer. The Vasus tried to pacify him, O bull among princes, but found no grace from that strictest of seers Āpava, who was wise in all the Laws, O tiger among men. The law-minded hermit said, 'You, Dhara, and the other Vasus, are cursed, but after one year you shall come to the end of your curse. But Dyaus, for whose sake you have been cursed by me, shall live for a long time in the world of men by his own doing. It is not to commit a falsehood that I speak to you in my anger! The great-minded God shall bear no offspring among men. He shall become a law-abiding mortal, expert on all weapons, and devoted to his father's well-being; but he shall forsake the pleasure of women.'

'Having thus spoken to all the Vasus, the great seer went his way. Thereupon they all came to me and implored me that I bestow a boon on them, as I did, O king: "Throw us in the water of the Ganges when each of us is born." And so exactly have I done, to deliver the cursed Gods from the world of men. But Dyaus alone, O best of kings, shall have to live in the world of men for a long time, because of the curse of the seer.'

When the Goddess had finished her tale she disappeared there and then. And, taking the boy child with her, she went her own way. He became known under two names, Devavrata and Gāngeya, this son of Śaṃtanu, who surpassed Śaṃtanu in virtues. And Śaṃtanu himself sorrowfully repaired to his own castle.

I shall celebrate the boundless virtue of this Śaṃtanu and the greatness of this great-spirited king who was the scion of Bharata and whose illustrious history is styled the *Mahābhārata.*

Vaiśaṃpāyana said:

This King Śaṃtanu was a sage, honored by Gods, kings, and seers, and inspirited by the Law. In all the worlds he was famous for being true to his word. Self-control, generosity, forbearance, resoluteness, perseverance, and a high majesty were the perennial virtues that were lodged with the mettlesome Śaṃtanu, a bull among kings. And, thus endowed with virtue, this king, equally proficient in the Law and in Profit, was the herdsman of the lineage of Bharata, and of all good people. His neck was marked like a conch shell, his shoulders were wide, his power was like a rutting elephant's; and Law for him was established over Pleasure and Profit: such were the virtues that were lodged with the mettlesome Śaṃtanu, O bull among Bhāratas. There was no baron like him in the Law. Him, most eminent judge of all the Laws, who lived by his Law, the princes of the earth consecrated to rule the realm. And

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with that herdsman of the Bhāratas all the princes of earth were freed from sorrow, fear, and worry, and woke every morning from happy dreams. At that time, since the world was guarded by princes that were led by Śaṃtanu, brahmindom reigned supreme by the restraint of all the classes. The baronage served brahmindom, the commoners were devoted to the baronage, and the serfs, humbly loving brahmindom and baronage, served the commoners. Seated in lovely Hāstinapura, the central city of the Kurus, he swayed all earth to her boundaries of oceans.

King was he equal to the king of the Gods, who knew the Law, upright, true to his word. The greatest fortune visited him as he sought Law and generosity and austerity. No passion or hatred did he foster; his aspect was benign as the moon's, in heat he emulated the sun, in speed the force of the wind; in his wrath he matched Death, in forbearance the earth. Neither cattle nor boar, deer nor fowl suffered useless death, king, when Śaṃtanu lorded the earth. The kingdom was ruled by brahmindom and Law, while that fair-spirited Śaṃtanu impartially ruled the creatures without lust or passion. That was the time when rites were performed in worship of Gods, seers, and ancestors, and no unlawful death befell any breathing creature. Of the hapless and the friendless, and of all that were born from beast, the king was the father. While that overlord of kings of kings, that greatest of the Princes of the Kurus ruled, speech was wedded to truth, thought to Law and giving. Three times three foursomes of years did the king take his pleasure of women; then he became a hermit, His son Gāngeya, the Vasu who was now named Devavrata, and of like beauty, like conduct, like behavior, like learning, excelled in all weapons and, among all other princes, was mighty of mettle, mighty in strength, mighty in prowess, and mighty with chariots.

Once when he had shot a deer, King Śaṃtanu followed the Ganges downstream and saw that little water stood in the river. Seeing her so, this bull among men Śaṃtanu began to worry. 'Why is it that the queen of rivers does not flow as it did before?' The spirited prince looked for the reason and saw a large boy of perfect body and handsome face who was handling a divine bow like the God Sacker of Cities and stood there stopping the entire Ganges with sharp arrows. And as he saw the river Ganges halted by the arrows where he stood, the king was astounded by the sight of this wondrous, superhuman feat. Śaṃtanu, however wise, did not recognize his own son, whom he had seen only once before when he was hardly born. But the boy, on seeing his father, played an illusion on him with his wizardry; and when he had confused him he disappeared there and then.

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When King Śaṃtanu saw that wonder, he suspected it was his son, and he said to the Ganges, 'Show him!' Wearing a beautiful form, the Ganges showed him the boy bedecked with ornaments, holding him by the right hand. Śaṃtanu failed to recognize her, adorned with all her finery and clad in a dustless skirt, even though he had known her before.

The Ganges said:

This is the eighth son, king, which you have fathered on me—he is yours, tiger among men, take him to your house. He has learned the *Vedas* with their branches from Vasiṣṭha himself, and he is mighty in battle like Indra, an excellent archer and marksman. The Gods esteem him, and so do the Asuras, always; and what knowledge Uśanas has, that he knows entirely. And likewise the knowledge that Angiras's son possesses, he for whom Gods and Asuras bow alike, that knowledge too lies firmly lodged with him, your strong-armed, great-spirited son, with its branches and off-shoots, Jamadagni's son, Rāma the seer, high-mighty and unassailable—what he knows of weapons is also lodged with him. This is your son, king, a great bowman, expert in Law and Profit, a champion—I give him to you, champion, take him home!

Vaiśaṃpāyana said:

When she had thus permitted him, Śaṃtanu took his son, who shone like the sun, and returned to his castle. And as he went to his castle, which was like the city of the Sacker of Cities, the Paurava deemed himself richly fulfilled in all his desires. He thereupon anointed his son Young King over the Pauravas; and Śaṃtanu's famous son won, with the manner of his life, the affection of the Pauravas, his father, and the kingdom, O bull among Bhāratas. So the boundlessly mighty king of the earth enjoyed himself with his son and passed four years.

—Translated and Edited by J.A.B. Van Buitenen

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The Descent of the Gaṅgā

Anne Feldhaus

According to the *Gautamī Māhātmya*, the Sanskrit Māhātmya of the Godāvarī River, the Godāvarī is the southern branch of the Gaṅgā, the Ganges River of northern India. The text begins with a long, involved account of the origin of the Gaṅgā, a narrative that takes up seven chapters and more than four hundred verses in the Sanskrit version. I summarize that version in some detail here ...

The demon Tāraka was harassing the gods. Since Tāraka could be killed only by a son of Śiva, the gods plotted to get Śiva to marry Pārvatī, the daughter of Himālaya. Pārvatī, for her part, practiced asceticism in order to get Śiva as her husband. The gods sent Kāma to shoot Śiva with his arrows of lust. Śiva burned up Kāma, but agreed to marry Pārvatī.

The wedding took place at Pārvatī's paternal home in the Himālayas. It was a marvelously festive affair. During the ceremony, Brahmā caught a glimpse of the bride's toe. Affected by adulterous lust, he ejaculated semen onto the ground. Ashamed [*lajjayā kaluṣibhūta*], Brahmā ground his semen under his foot, thus creating the tiny sages called Vālakhilyas. Śiva gave Brahmā an earthen pot of water so that he could do away with his sin [*pāpa*].

The pious demon-king Bali prospered. Threatened by Bali's success, the gods went to Viṣṇu for help. Viṣṇu took the form of the Vāmana, a Brahman dwarf, and came to the place where Bali was performing a sacrifice. Viṣṇu asked Bali to grant him three strides' worth of land. Bali agreed, whereupon Viṣṇu grew gigantic. His first stride comprehended the earth. The second reached the world of Brahmā—that is, heaven. The third step landed on Bali's back, and Viṣṇu made Bali the lord of the Underworld.

When, with Viṣṇu's second step, his foot appeared in heaven, Brahmā greeted him with a traditional gesture of hospitality, pouring water over the foot. The water Brahmā used was the only water he had: that in the earthen

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vessel given to him earlier by Śiva. This water dropped from Viṣṇu's foot onto Mount Meru. From there it flowed off in the four cardinal directions, the southern stream being taken by Śiva on his matted locks of hair.

Pārvatī became jealous of the water (now a woman named Gaṅgā) in Śiva's hair. Gaṇeśa hatched a plot to get Gaṅgā removed. Disguised as a Brahman, Gaṇeśa went to the *āśram* of the Brahman sage [*ṛṣi*] Gautama at Brahmagiri (Tryambakeśvar), where Brahmā had once performed a sacrifice. Now, although there was drought everywhere else, Gautama's *āśram* had plenty of food, and for this reason large numbers of Brahmans had gathered here.

At Gaṇeśa's instructions, Pārvatī's maidservant or companion Jayā took the form of a cow, entered one of Gautama's rice fields, and began to graze. Gautama took up a blade of grass and tried to shoo her away. As the grass touched the cow, she fell down dead. Because of this event, Gautama's Brahman guests threatened to leave. Gaṇeśa then suggested getting water from Śiva's matted hair. Gautama set off for Śiva's home on Mount Kailāsa, to try to get the Gaṅgā.

Gautama sang a hymn of praise to Śiva. He asked Śiva to send the Gaṅgā onto Brahmagiri, and requested that the river have certain characteristics. Śiva gave Gautama a lock of his hair. Gautama returned with the lock of hair and placed it on Brahmagiri, where the water began to flow. Gautama circumambulated the Gaṅgā and decided to bathe on both banks of the river. Śiva described the river's holiness to Gautama and gave him instructions for bathing in it.

Later, after the Brahman Gautama had brought the Gaṅgā to earth at Brahmagiri, another branch of the river was brought down by a Kṣatriya, Bhagīratha. Bhagīratha got the [remaining] water from Śiva's locks in order to sprinkle his great-great-great-uncles, the sixty thousand Sāgaras. The Sāgaras (sons of Sagara) had been turned to ashes in the underworld several generations previously, as they tried to rescue the horse from their father's horse sacrifice. After reviving the Sāgaras, Bhagīratha sent the Gaṅgā to the Himālayas. From there it flowed across northern India [*bhārata varṣa*] and into the eastern ocean.

This story, which is in fact a pastiche of stories and story fragments that are also found in Vedic, epic, Purāṇic, and oral versions, has been crafted in such a way as to give all three of the major gods of the Purāṇic pantheon, Brahmā, Viṣṇu, and Śiva, a role in the creation and descent of the river to earth. In order to bring in all three of the gods, the narrative gets interrupted, sidetracked, and restarted a number of times. It never arrives at the birth of Skanda, the son of Śiva who will kill Tāraka, the demon with whom the story

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began. The story of Śiva and Pārvatī's wedding is shunted off into that of Brahmā's adulterous lust. Soon thereafter the scene shifts to Bali's sacrifice, where the Vāmana incarnation of Viṣṇu is introduced. After the water has fallen from Brahmā's water pot over Viṣṇu's feet to Śiva's head, Pārvatī returns to the story, no longer a new bride but now a jealous wife. By the time, the river reaches earth, it can appropriately be said to have come from Brahmā, from Viṣṇu, from Śiva, or from all three. The Māhātmya calls the river *tri-daivatya*, 'derived from [all] three gods.'

Another major point of the story is that the Godāvarī is identical in substance with the Ganges. Through the episode in which Śiva takes the Gaṅgā on his matted hair and Pārvatī becomes jealous, the story is that of both the Ganges and the Godāvarī. When the story splits, telling separately of the two different ways in which the water came to flow on earth as the two separate rivers, the text tries to establish the Godāvarī's superiority to the Ganges. The Godāvarī was brought to earth *before* the Ganges and is hence called Vṛddhā, or 'Elder,' Gaṅgā. Furthermore, the Godāvarī, which is also called the Gautamī Gaṅgā, was brought to earth by the Brahman Gautama, a person of higher caste than the Kṣatriya, Bhagīratha, who brought the Bhāgīrathī Gaṅgā of northern India.

Various episodes in the story reveal its Brahman authors' interest in asceticism, almsgiving, Vedic sacrifice, ancestor rites, the destruction of demons, and the removal of sin. In addition, the story reveals an interest in themes and topics that are also prominent in the oral story about the origin of the Kṛṣṇā River cited in the introduction to this book [*Water and Womanhood*]. The Godāvarī, too, like the Kṛṣṇā in the oral story about it, first comes to earth at a time of drought. Gautama's *āśram*, where the water begins to flow, is the one place where there is plenty of food. Furthermore, like the woman named Kṛṣṇā in the oral story, the river on Śiva's head is female—it arouses the jealousy of Śiva's wife—and so is the cow whose killing provides the occasion for the river to be brought to earth. In the Māhātmya story, the cow must die for the river to flow, as in the oral story the woman Kṛṣṇā must die in order for the river Kṛṣṇā to flow. And, finally, the Māhātmya story begins with a theme that, although not found in the Kṛṣṇā story, is extremely important in the practice of religion among both low-caste and high-caste folk in Maharashtra: the pressing need for a couple—in this case, the divine pair Śiva and Pārvatī—to have a son. ...[T]wo motifs of the story are the most important: first, that the water falls from heaven onto Mount Meru and flows off from it in various directions; and second, that one of the streams falls from Meru onto Śiva's head.

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Poems and a Will

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Prayer to Mother Goddess–1

My Great Devi, granter of boons
The auspicious one, The blessed one
Thou art the Queen of Vindhyachal Mountain
On the hill, a fair temple stands
There you reside, O Devi
Below the hill, Ganga flows
In its clear and cool waters
You, the Primordial Power bathe, O Devi
On a sandalwood seat, studded with diamonds
You sit and chew betel leaves, O Devi.

—Translated by Shakuntala Varma

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देवी-गीत - १

मेरी महारानी वरदायनी कि धन्य–धन्य विंध्याचल रानी
देवी पहाड़ों के ऊपर जहां मंदिर बना खासा
तहां जगदंबे का बासा
देवी तले बहे गंगा, गंगा निर्मल पानी
नहायें मेरी आदि शक्ति रानी
देवी चन्दन की चौकी, चौकी जड़े हीरे
चाभती पान के बीड़े।

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Prayer to Mother Goddess–4

O, parrot dear, fly to the other bank of the Ganga
Cajole and please the Devi.
I have served food on a golden platter
O, parrot dear, fly to the other bank of the Ganga
Please feed the Devi.
I have filled a golden pitcher with Ganga water
O, parrot dear, fly to the other bank of the Ganga
Please quench the thirst of the Devi.
With cloves and cardamom, I have prepared betel leaves
O, parrot dear, fly to the other bank of the Ganga
Let the Devi chew the betel leaves.
With choicest flower buds, I have prepared a bed for the Devi
O, parrot dear, fly away to the other bank of the Ganga
Please put the Devi to sleep.

—Translated by Shakuntala Varma

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देवी-गीत - ४

उड़ जा रे सुगनवा गंगा–पार
मनाय लाओ देवी को
सोने के थाल में भोजन परोसा
उड़ जा रे सुगनवा गंगा–पार
खिलाय आओ देवी को
सोने के गडुआ गंगा जल पानी
उड़ जा रे सुगनवा गंगा–पार
पिलाय आओ देवी को
लौंग–इलायची का बीड़ा लगायो
उड़ जा रे सुगनवा गंगा–पार
रचाय आओ देवी को
चुन–चुन कलियों की सेज बिछाई
उड़ जा रे सुगनवा गंगा–पार
सुलाय आओ देवी को।

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Sohar–10

I am tormented with pain
But my nanad goes about laughing
The bahu pleads with her father-in-law
'O please my Sasurji I beseech you
Send my nanad away to her in-laws' house.'
'The kangan is still with the goldsmith
And the chunri is with the dyers
Rivers Ganga and Jamuna are in spate
How can I send away my daughter?'
'I will give my kangan
My jethani will give her chunri
I will arrange for a boat to ferry her across.
Please send her away right now!'
As my husband enters through the door,
I plead with him too,
He makes the same argument,
'The kangan is still with the goldsmith
And the chunri is with the dyers,
Rivers Ganga and Jamuna are in spate,
How can 1 bid her farewell?'
'I will give my kangan
My jethani will give her chunri
I will arrange for a boat to ferry her across
Please send her away right now!'

—Translated by Shakuntala Varma

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सोहर - १०

हमरे तो पीरा आवे ननदी हंसत फिरे
द्वारे से ससुर आवें बहुआ अरज करे
"ओ ससुरजी मैं पइआं लागूं, ननदी विदा करो"
"कंगना सुनार घर, चुनरी रंगरेज घर
गंगा–यमुना बाढ़ी अगम, कैसे विदा करौ"
"कंगना मैं आपन देबों, चुनरी जेठानी के
गंगा–यमुना नाव फंदइबो, अबहीं विदा करो"
द्वारे से सइआं आवें धनिआ अरज करे
"हे सइआं मैं पइआं लागूं, बहिनी विदा करो"
"कंगना सुनार घर, चुनरी रंगरेज घर
गंगा–यमुना बाढ़ी अगम, कैसे विदा करौ"
"कंगना मैं आपन देबों', चुनरी जेठानी के
गंगा–यमुना नाव फंदइबो अबहीं विदा करो।"

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Sohar–11

In the midst of the Ganga and Jamuna
A woman stands praying:
'O Ganga give me a big wave
So that I drown in it.'
'Are you unhappy with your father-in-law and
mother-in-law?
Is your parents' home too far away?
Or is your beloved in an alien country
What ails you O woman
That you want to drown yourself?'
'No, I am not unhappy with my father-in-law and
mother-in-law
And my parents' home is not too far away
Nor is my beloved in an alien country
O Ganga what ails me is a barren womb.'
'Go home, O woman, I will not give you a wave
As exactly nine months later you will have a son
And your ears will hear the sounds of sohar!'
'O Ganga when a son is born
I will offer you a rich and beautiful chunri
Give me a son like Bhagirath
So that the world sings praises of his noble deeds!'

—Translated by Shakuntala Varma

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सोहर - 11

गंगा यमुनवा के बीच तिरिआ एक तप करे हो
गंगा आपन लहर एक देतू त मझधार डूबित हो
किआ तोरे सास ससुर दुःख किआ नइहर दूर देस हो
तिरिआ किआ तोर पिया परदेस कवन दुःख डुबहु हो
नाहीं मोरे सास–ससुर दुःख नहिं नइहर दूर देस हो
गंगा नाहीं मोर पिया परदेस कोखिअ दुःख डूबिल हो
जाहु तिरिआ घर अपने त हम न हलर देबों हो
तिरिआ आज के नौउयें महिनवा होरिल तोरे होइहें
सोहर तुहूं सुनबू हो
गहबर पिअरी चढ़इबो कि जब रे होरिल होइहें
गंगा देहु भगीरथ पूत जगत जस गावई हो।

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A Pond Named Ganga

Chandrashekhar Kambar

Our village pond named Mother Ganga
stands where the red hill meets the white.
On all three sides grow a million plants,
a seven-walled fort
no man can enter or get out of.
In there, the grunt, growl, and screech
of dogs, foxes, pigs, and parrots
and numberless other creatures.
Each has its share of wind, rain, light, bush,
green, fodder, fear, sleep, and sex.
The trees on the bank have swarms of bats
hanging upside down,
with their broken reflections in the water below.
Generations of flies, fleas, bugs of every kind
breed in endless motion,
in unbroken exchanges of give and take.
The water has nowhere to go.

No great waves rise and fall here
and no cold winds blow,
but the water rustles in the roots of old trees,
swirls in the village gutters,
and in the round white holes of the crabs.

Any time the east's old carbuncle breaks
and oozes blood and pus,

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movement begins here:
babysnake ripples wake, break, roll about,
and the flocks of bats break up into lines,
form sixes and sevens,
circle on their wrinkled wings.

In the muddy mired water,
one-legged herons walk,
pecking and devouring the floating glistening fish.
People begin to come for the water:
to drink, to bathe in, to wash
their cattle's dung and urine,
to reach our god Birappa's feet,
to bathe our Black Mother Goddess,
to piss and shit,
to wet orthodox widows' weeds,
to get the brahmins' holy water,
for this, that, and the other.
The water spent this way
runs down the gutters of the village
and comes back to the pond.
This daily round of commerce
is its specialty.

This water too has its Ganges Hymns,
its Hundred Names, its Thousand Names,
its place-legends,
braided by the village brahmins
like their own tufts.
It's the grease from the Old God's matted hair,

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it's the green shit from the sage's thighs,
it's Mother Ganga herself who has stayed here
to wash the dirt from her ears.
When she came,
she came with a dowry in her lap,
the holy germs from the mud and sand of her country,
the fear that ropes are snakes,
the magic mirror held up to seeing eyes.

The Mother's powers are miraculous.
A copper coin turns green
the moment you dip it in this water.
Burnish it, and she deludes you
with impressions of gold.
She's the one who gave the sorceress of Bengal
a pregnant woman's dead hand for a wand.
Three gulps of her water
gives barren women firm embryos.
She has taken whole schoolchildren,
bikes and all, into her maw.
And she is the one who possessed
the untouchable woman
and said in her voice, 'Yes, O Yes!'
when the padre claimed,
'This the water on which Jesus walked.'

Its depth is the bottom of the bottomless depth,
world below netherworld below worlds below,
not mud and pebble.
Anyone who says it is,
will have worms swarming in his mouth.

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Four or five of our townsmen got down there,
and slept (they say) with serpent princesses—
they're now gods in stone, stories in ballads,
and they get worshipped on full-moon and festival days.
People say, the glittering fish
that guzzle on pearls and diamonds
can't digest them, and so float dead.
So too, night and day,
people become one-legged herons,
and ooze like saliva from the herons' beaks.

It's now the place for bastard children, the Karnas,
and for the cowards who can't accept them.
This is true. There are such men,
who have no burials, no claim on funeral fires.
They float on the water for three days and nights,
and then our Mother Ganga opens her eyes.
Then the bodies of these men
go to the water-creatures,
their souls to the trees
to become hanging bats.
They join the Mother's private police force
and guard her pearls and diamonds.

It's true there's no evidence
for any of these claims
in the brahmins' books or the shepherds' songs.
But the brahmin did say so once
in a trance.

—Translated from Kannada by A.K. Ramanujan

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Will and Testament

Jawaharlal Nehru

I have received so much love and affection from the Indian people that nothing that I can do can repay even a small fraction of it, and indeed there can be no repayment of so precious a thing as affection. Many have been admired, some have been revered, but the affection of all classes of the Indian people has come to me in such abundant measure that I have been overwhelmed by it. I can only express the hope that in the remaining years I may live, I shall not be unworthy of my people and their affection.

To my innumerable comrades and colleagues, I owe an even deeper debt of gratitude. We have been joint partners in great undertakings and have shared the triumphs and sorrows which inevitably accompany them.

I wish to declare with all earnestness that I do not want any religious ceremonies performed for me after my death. I do not believe in any such ceremonies and to submit to them, even as a matter of form, would be hypocrisy and an attempt to delude ourselves and others.

When I die, I should like my body to be cremated. If I die in a foreign country, my body should be cremated there and my ashes sent to Allahabad. A small handful of these ashes should be thrown into the Ganga and the major portion of them disposed of in the manner indicated below. No part of these ashes should be retained or preserved.

My desire to have a handful of my ashes thrown into the Ganga at Allahabad has no religious significance, so far as I am concerned. I have no religious sentiment in the matter. I have been attached to the Ganga and the Jamuna rivers in Allahabad ever since my childhood and, as I have grown older, this attachment has also grown. I have watched their varying moods as the seasons changed, and have often thought of the history and myth and tradition and song and story that have become attached to them through the long ages and become part of their flowing waters. The Ganga, especially, is

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the river of India, beloved of her people, round which are intertwined her racial memories, her hopes and fears, her songs of triumph, her victories, and her defeats. She has been a symbol of India's age-long culture and civilization, ever-changing, ever-flowing, and yet ever the same Ganga. She reminds me of the snow-covered peaks and the deep valleys of the Himalaya, which I have loved so much, and of the rich and vast plains below, where my life and work have been cast. Smiling and dancing in the morning sunlight, and dark and gloomy and full of mystery as the evening shadows fall, a narrow, slow, and graceful stream in winter, and a vast roaring thing during the monsoon, broad-bosomed almost as the sea, and with something of the sea's power to destroy, the Ganga has been to me a symbol and a memory of the past of India, running into the present and flowing on to the great ocean of the future. And though I have discarded much of past tradition and custom, and am anxious that India should rid herself of all shackles that bind and constrain her and divide her people, and suppress vast numbers of them and prevent the free development of the body and the spirit; though I seek all this, yet I do not wish to cut myself off from that past completely. I am proud of that great inheritance that has been, and is, ours, and I am conscious that I too, like all of us, am a link in that unbroken chain which goes back to the dawn of history in the immemorial past of India. That chain I would not break, for I treasure it and seek inspiration from it. And as witness of this desire of mine and as my last homage to India's cultural inheritance, I am making this request that a handful of my ashes be thrown into the Ganga at Allahabad to be carried to the great ocean that washes India's shore.

The major portion of my ashes should, however, be disposed of otherwise. I want these to be carried high up into the air in an aeroplane and scattered from that height over the fields where the peasants of India toil, so that they might mingle with the dust and soil of India and become an indistinguishable part of India.

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HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVES

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Travels in India

Jean Baptiste Tavernier

The 6th [December] to Alinchan (Alum Chand), 9 *coss*.

About two leagues on this side of Alum Chand you meet the Ganges. Monsieur Bernier, Physician to the king, and a man named Rachepot, with whom I was, were surprised to see that this river, of which they make so much talk, is not larger than the Seine in front of the Louvre, it being perhaps thought that it equalled in width, at the least, the Danube below Belgrade. There is actually so little water from the month of March to the month of June or July, when the rains commence, that boats are not able to ascend it. On arrival at the Ganges, we each drank a glass of wine which we mixed with water—this caused some internal disturbance; but our attendants who drank it alone were much more tormented than we were. The Dutch, who have a house on the banks of the Ganges, never drink the water of the river, except after it has been boiled; as for the native inhabitants, they have been accustomed to it from their youth; the king even and all his court drink no other. You see every day a large number of camels which do nothing else but fetch water from the Ganges.

The 7th [Dec.] we came to Halabas (Alláhábád), 8 *coss*.

Alláhábád is a large town built on a point of land where the Ganges and the Jumna meet one another. It has a fine castle built of cut stone, with a double ditch, and it is the dwelling of the Governor. He is one of the greatest nobles in India, and as he is troubled with bad health he employs some Persian Physicians, and he then also had in his service M. Claude Maille of Bourges, who practised both surgery and medicine. It was he who advised us not to drink any of the Ganges water, which would produce disturbance of the stomach, but to drink rather the water from wells. The chief of these Persian Physicians whom this Governor had in his pay, one day threw his wife down from the top of a terrace to the ground, impelled apparently to this cruel action by a freak of jealousy. He thought that she was killed, but she had only

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two or three ribs broken, and the relations of the woman threw themselves at the feet of the Governor to demand justice. The Governor summoned the physician, and commanded him to withdraw, not wishing to keep him any longer in his service. He obeyed this order, and, having placed his disabled wife in a *pallankeen*, he departed with all his family. He was not more than three or four marches from the town when the Governor, finding himself unusually ill, sent to recall him, upon which the Physician stabbed his wife, four of his children, and thirteen female slaves, after which he returned to the Governor, who said nothing to him about it, and took him again into his service.

On the 8th I crossed the Ganges in a large boat, having waited from the morning till mid-day on the bank of the river, till M. Maille brought a letter from the Governor giving us permission to cross. For on each side there is a *Darogah*, who allows no one to pass without an order; and he takes note also of the kind of merchandise carried, each waggon being charged four rupees, and a chariot paying but one, without counting the boat, for which it is necessary to pay separately.

This day the halt was at Sadoul Serail	16 *coss.*
The 9th at Yakedil-sera (Jagdis Sarai)	10 ,,
10th at Bouraky-sera (Baboo Sarai)	10 ,,
11th at Banarou (Benares)	10 ,,

Benares is a large and very well-built town, the majority of the houses being of brick and cut stone, and more lofty than those of other towns of India; but it is very inconvenient that the streets are so narrow. It has several *caravansaráis*, and, among others, one very large and well built. In the middle of the court there are two galleries where they sell cottons, silken stuffs, and other kinds of merchandise. The majority of those who vend the goods are the workers who have made the pieces, and in this manner foreigners obtain them at first hand. These workers, before exposing anything for sale, have to go to him who holds the contract, in order to get the king's stamp impressed on the pieces of calico or silk, otherwise they are fined and flogged. The town is situated to the north of the Ganges, which runs the whole length of the walls, and two leagues farther down a large river joins it from the west. The idolaters have one of their principal pagodas in Benares, and I shall describe it in Book II, where I shall speak of the religion of the *Banians*.

About 500 paces from the town, in a north-western direction, there is a mosque where you see several Muhammadan tombs, of which some are of a very beautiful design. The most beautiful are placed each in the middle of a

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garden enclosed by walls which have openings of half a foot square, through which the passers-by can see them. The most considerable of all is like a great square pedestal, each face of which is about forty paces long. In the middle of this platform you see a column of 32 to 35 feet in height, all of a piece, and which three men could with difficulty embrace.[1] It is of sandstone, so hard that I could not scratch it with my knife. It terminates in a pyramid, and has a great ball on the point, and below the ball it is encircled by large beads. All the sides of this tomb are covered with figures of animals cut in relief in the stone, and it has been higher above the ground than it now appears; several of the old men who guard some of these tombs having assured me that since fifty years it has subsided more than 30 feet. They add that it is the tomb of one of the kings of Bhután, who was interred there after he had left his country to conquer this kingdom, from which he was subsequently driven by the descendants of Tamerlane. It is from this kingdom of Bhután that they bring musk, and I shall give a description of it in Book III.

I remained at Benares on the 12th and 13th, and during these two days there was continual rain; but it did not prevent me from resuming my journey, and on the evening of the 13th I crossed the Ganges with the passport of the Governor. They examine all travellers' baggage before embarking in the boat, personal property pays nothing, and it is only on merchandise that one must pay duty.

The 13th [December] I halted at Baterpour (Bahádurpur)	2 *coss.*
14th at Satragy-sera (Sadrázá-ki-sarái on old map)	8 „
15th at Moniarky-sera (Mohaniá-ki-sarái)	6 „

During the morning of this day, after having travelled two *coss*, I crossed a river called Carnasar sou,[2] and at three *coss* from thence one crosses another named Saode-sou, and both are crossed by fords.

The 16th at Gourmabad (Khurmábád)	8 *coss.*

It is a town on a river called Goudera-sou,[3] and you cross it by a stone bridge.

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[1] This was probally the Asoka pillar, known as the Lát Bhairo, which is believed to have been erected in the third century B.C.

[2] *Sou* for *su*, Turkish for river. This appears to have been the Karamnasar river.

[3] Koodra river.

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The 17th at Saseron (Sásserám) 4 *coss.*

Sásserám is a town at the foot of the mountains, near to which there is a large tank. You see a small island in the middle, where there is a very beautiful mosque, in which there is the tomb of a *Nawáb* named Selim-Khán, who had it built during the time he was Governor of the Province. There is a fine stone bridge to cross into the island, which is all flanked and paved with large cut stones. On one of the sides of the tank there is a large garden, in the middle of which is another beautiful tomb of the son of the same *Nawáb,* Selim-Khan, who succeeded his father in the government of the Province. When you wish to go to the mine of Soulmelpour, of which I shall speak in the last book of this narrative, you leave the main road to Patna, and turn straight southwards by Ekberbourg[4] and the famous fort of Rhodas (Rohtas), as I shall say in the same place.

The 18th [December] I crossed, in a boat, the river Sonsou, which comes from the mountains of the south; and, after crossing it, those who have goods have to pay a certain duty.

This day my halt was at Daoud-Nagar-Sera (Doudnagar), where there is a fine tomb 9 *coss.*

The 19th to Halva-sera (Arwal) 10 ,,

20th to Aga-sera 9 ,,

In the morning I met 130 elephants, both large and small, which they were taking to Delhi to the Great Mogul.

The 21st to Patna 10 *coss.*

Patna is one of the largest towns in India, on the margin of the Ganges, on its western side, and it is not less than two *coss* in length. The houses are not better than in the majority of the other towns of India, and they are nearly all roofed with thatch or bamboo. The Dutch company has an establishment there on account of the trade in saltpetre, which it refines at a large village called Chaprā, situated on the right bank of the Ganges, 10 *coss* above Patna.

Arriving at Patna with M. Bernier, we encountered some Dutchmen in the street who were returning to Chapra, but who halted their carriages in order to salute us. We did not separate before we had emptied together two bottles of Shiráz wine in the open street, regarding which there is nothing to

[4] Ekberbourg is undoubtedly identical with Akbárpur, a village at the foot of the hill upon which the remains of the old fort of Rohtás are still to be seen.

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remark upon in this country, where one lives without ceremony, and with perfect liberty.

I remained eight days in Patna, during which time an occurrence happened which will show the reader that unnatural crime does not rest unpunished by the Muhammadans. A *Mimbachi* who commanded 1000 foot disgraced a young boy who was in his service;...the boy, overwhelmed with grief, chose his time to avenge himself, and being one day out hunting with his master, and removed from the other attendants by about a quarter of a league, he came behind him and cut off his head with his sword. He then rode immediately to the town at full speed, crying aloud that he had slain his master for such a reason, and came at once to the house of the Governor, who placed him in prison. But he left it at the end of six months, and although all the relatives of the defunct did what they could to procure his execution, the Governor did not dare to condemn him, as he feared the people, who protested that the young man had acted rightly.

I left Patna in a boat to descend to Dacca on the 29th of January (?), between 11 o'clock and noon. If the river had been strong, as it is after the rains, I should have embarked at Alláhábád, or at the least at Benares.

The same day I slept at Sera Beconcour, 15 *coss*.

Five *coss* on this side of Beconcour you meet a river called Pompon sou, which comes from the south and flows into the Ganges.

The 30th [December] to Sera D'Eriia (Daria-Pur?), 17 *coss*.

On the 31st, after having gone 4 *coss* or thereabouts, you meet the river Kaoa, which comes from the south; 3 *coss* lower you see another called Chanon, which falls from the north; 4 *coss* farther you discover that called Erguga, which comes from the south; and again, 6 *coss* below that of Aquera, which comes from the same quarter, and these four rivers lose their names in the Ganges. All that day I beheld lofty mountains[5] on the south side, and at a distance from the Ganges some 10 *coss* and some 15 *coss*, and I came to a halt at Monger (Mongir) town, 18 *coss*.

The first day of January 1666, after having sailed two hours I saw the Gandak enter the Ganges from the north. It is a large navigable river.

This evening the halt was at Zangira (Janjira,) 8 *coss*.

But as the Ganges twisted much during the day it is by water fully 22 *coss*.

[5] Kharakpúr hills and adjoining ranges.

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During the 2d, between 6 o'clock in the morning and about 11 o'clock, I saw three rivers enter the Ganges, and they all three come from the north side. The first is called Ronova, the second Taè, and the third Chanan.

I slept at Baquelpour (Bhágalpur), 18 *coss.*

The 3d, after four hours' travelling on the Ganges, I encountered the river Katare,[6] which comes from the north, and slept this day at a village called Pon-gangel, at the end of the mountains which abut on the Ganges, 13 *coss.*

On the 4th [January], one hour below Pongangel, I met a great river called Mart-nadi (Kalindry?), which comes from the north, and I slept at Ragemehale (Rájmahál), 6 *coss.*

Rájmahál is a town on the right bank of the Ganges, and when you approach it by land you find that for one or two *coss* the roads are paved with brick up to the town. It was formerly the residence of the Governors of Bengal, because it is a splendid hunting country, and, moreover, the trade there was considerable. But the river having taken another course, and passing only at a distance of a full half league from the town, as much for this reason as for the purpose of restraining the king of Arakan, and many Portuguese bandits who have settled at the mouths of the Ganges, and by whom the inhabitants of Dacca, up to which place they made incursions, were molested,—the Governor and the merchants who dwelt at Rájmahál removed to Dacca, which is to-day a place of considerable trade.

On the 6th, having arrived at a great town called Donapour, at 6 *coss* from Rájmahál, I left M. Bernier, who went to Kásimbázár, and from thence to Hugli by land, because when the river is low one is unable to pass on account of a great bank of sand which is before a town called Soutiqui.

I lay this evening at Toutipour, distant from Rájmahál 12 *coss.*

At sunrise I beheld a number of crocodiles asleep on the sand.

The 7th I reached Acerat (Hadjrápúr), 25 *coss.*

From Acerat to Dacca, by land, there are still 45 *coss.* All this day I beheld so large a number of crocodiles that, at length, I became desirous to shoot one in order to ascertain if what is commonly said is true, namely, that a shot from a gun does not affect them. The shot struck him in the jaw and the blood flowed, but he did not remain where he was, but went into the river.

On the 8th I again saw a great number of these crocodiles lying on the bank of the river, and I fired at two with two shots, each charge having three balls. Immediately they were wounded they turned over on the back, opening the mouth and dying on the spot.

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[6] Probably the Kosi.

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This day I slept at Douloudia, 17 *coss*.

The crows were the cause of our finding a fine fish which the fishermen had concealed on the bank of the river in the reeds. For when our boatmen observed that there were a great number of crows which cawed and entered the reeds, they concluded that they must contain something unusual, and they searched so well that they found sufficient to make a good meal.

On the 9th [January], at 2 p.m., we encountered a river called Chativor which comes from the north, and our halt was at Dampour, 16 *coss*.

The 10th we slept on the margin of the river in a place far removed from houses, and made this day 15 *coss*.

On the 11th, having arrived towards evening at the spot where the Ganges divides into three branches, one of which goes to Dacca, we slept at the entrance of this channel, at a large village called Jatrapour, 20 *coss*.

Those who have no baggage can proceed by land from Jatrapour to Dacca, and they shorten their journey very much, because the river winds about considerably.

On the 12th, at noon, we passed before a large town called Bagamara(p), and slept at Kasiata, another large town, 11 *coss*.

On the 13th, at noon, we met a river at 2 *coss* from Dacca called Laquiá, which comes from the north-east. Opposite the point where the two rivers join, there is a fortress with several guns on each side. Half a *coss* lower down you see another river called Pagalu,[7] over which there is a fine brick bridge, which Mir Jumlá ordered to be built. This river comes from the northeast, and half a *coss* below you find another called Cadamtali, which comes from the north, and which you also cross by a brick bridge; on both sides of the river you see several towers, where there are as it were enshrined many heads of men who have robbed on the high roads.

We arrived at Dacca towards evening, and accomplished this day 9 *coss*.

Dacca is a large town, which is only of extent as regards length, each person being anxious to have his house close to the Ganges. This length exceeds 2 *coss*; and from the last brick bridge, which I have mentioned above, up to Dacca, there is a succession of houses, separated one from the other, and inhabited for the most part by the carpenters who build galleys and other vessels. These houses are, properly speaking, only miserable huts made of bamboo, and mud which is spread over them. Those of Dacca are scarcely better built, and that

[7] *Pagla*. This term, meaning 'fool', is applied in deltaic regions in Bengal to branches or loops from rivers which derive their water not from an independent source, but from the river which they again rejoin.

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which is the residence of the Governor is an enclosure of high walls, in the middle of which is a poor house merely built of wood. He ordinarily resides under tents, which he pitches in a large court in this enclosure. The Dutch, finding that their goods were not sufficiently safe in the common houses of Dacca, have built a very fine house, and the English have also got one which is fairly good. The church of the Rev. Augustin Fathers is all of brick, and the workmanship of it is rather beautiful.

On the occasion of my last visit to Dacca, the *Nawáb* Sháistá Khán, who was then Governor of Bengal, was at war with the king of Arakan, whose navy generally consists of 200 galleys together with several other small boats. These galleys traverse the Gulf of Bengal and enter the Ganges, the tide ascending even beyond Dacca.

Sháistá Khán, uncle of the King Aurangzeb, who reigns at present, and the cleverest man in all his kingdom, found means for bribing many of the officers of the navy of the King of Arakan, and of a sudden forty galleys, which were commanded by Portuguese, joined him. In order to secure these new allies firmly in his service, he gave large pay to each of the Portuguese officers and to the soldiers in proportion, but the natives only received double the ordinary pay. It is a most surprising thing to see with what speed these galleys are propelled by oars. There are some so long that they have up to fifty oars on each side, but there are not more than two men to each oar. You see some which are much decorated, where the gold and azure have not been spared.

The Dutch have some of them in their service in which they carry their merchandise, and they also sometimes require to hire some from others, thus affording a means of livelihood to many people.

—Translated from French, with notes, by V. Ball

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India in the Early 19th Century

An Iranian's Travel Account, translation of Mir'at ul-ahwal-i jahan numa

Ahmad Behbahani

On Monday, the 7th of the revered month of Shawwal (A.H. 1221/Nov. A.D. 1806) having quitted my housewife who was on family way, I accompanied by the exalted Mirza Sangin Beg, scion of an ancient family, a towns-man belonging to the stock of the Khorasanian Qizilbash tribe, embarked on board a boat and set out for Azimabad. On the way, I came across a number of townships. Rajmahal being one of them: it is located at the last fringe of the border of Bangala and is the gate-way to Bihar. In former times, it was the head-quarters of the rulers of Bangala; and at one time was the seat of Government of Shah Shuja, a brother of Aurangzeb. The remains of those magnificient edifices are still extant on the bank of the Ganges. It has a very pleasant climate and being situated in the proximity to a mountain, wild games such as deers and stags are found in abundance in those regions. The ceramic potteries are manufactured here with great finesse, and carried away by way of present to other places.

Then, Bhagalpur: a very well-populated town and a big mart of yellowish-white cloth-pieces which are in vogue amongst the Rumians (the Turks) of Basra and Baghdad. Merchants having bought them from here, export them to other countries. On the way, I met with very big mass of rock that had protruded out of waters upon which a Hindu ascetic having built a hermitage lived in it; and is highly revered by men of his own flock. I could not know much about him. Silly persons narrated some anecdotes about him.

Then, Munger, a splendid town: it has a very lofty fort with a deep moat. Since the English do not like any other place to be developed except Kalkatta, they pay scant attention to its repair, so it is in a state of decay. It was constructed in such a fashion that batteries can not be mounted on it.

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Inside the fort, they have built their own residences and those of their sepoys and the rest is a sprawling field. The dwellings of the generality are outside the fort. The town is a rendezvous of shrewd and astute businessmen. Varieties of boxes and chairs of exquisite and storiated designs made of a very hard and durable plank of pretty-colour wood called the sal-wood are manufactured here and exported to other regions the like of which are scarcely to be found in other parts of the country.

As this region lies in the proximity to a mountain, a number of springs are found in its neighbourhoods: one of them is called the 'Sita-kund', which, while sailing from the side of Bangala, would fall on the way a little before the town of Munger located at the bank of the Ganges. The water of this spring is so hot that it is difficult to put the hand in it.

As for the name Sita-Kund: Sita is the name of a woman, who in piety and chastity is reckoned by the Hindus at par with Mary; and Kund means a spring. It is said that one day Sita wanted to wash herself but the weather was extremely cold, so as a token of her miraculous power there gushed out a spring (of hot water), and she bathed in it. Hindus, therefore, venerate this spring and deem it propitious to take a dip in it, and carry its water to other places as a gift of good omen. Though the water (of the spring) is extremely hot, rice or other victual is not cooked in it. But as the people say, the water when it streams out of the reservoir becomes at once very cold and wholesome and is very light, digestive and delicious. Near about it there are several springs of cold water as well. Many such springs are also found in the neighbourhoods of Tiflis and Erivan; and there is also one in the midway between Dahab and Qasr-e-Shirin, in which, as said earlier, I had a bath for the mange disease and found it efficacious.

The valley abounds in various kinds of birds and wild games; and in former times, was the hunting ground of the Sultans (of Bangala).

On the 7th day of the month of Zilqad of the same year (A.H. 1221/ January A.D. 1807), I arrived at Azimabad. Some of the friends came to receive me. But in deference to the wishes of the nephews of (sister's sons) of the aforementioned Mirza Ghulam Husain Khan, who was then away (to Lakhnau) in connection with the marriage negotiation of his brother Amir Ali Khan with the daughter of Nawab Asafuddowla's Ardali (Personal-attendant) nick-named Maharaja Jhau Lal, I stayed with them.

This (Azimabad) is the chief city of the province of Bihar and its name had been Patna. Azimushshan, a grandson of emperor Alamgir had resolved

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to get a city laid out here after his name at an estimated cost exceeding over a crore of rupees. The emperor named the city after him and hence it came to be known as Azimabad. Thus, the (new) city thrived and the original town of Bihar has down-come and reduced to the status of a village. It is presently known as Patna. This is a beggar-fostering city, extremely picturesque and of fine climate. All sorts of cloth-pieces and edibles after being bartered here are trafficked to other neighbouring regions, in the whole of Bangala, nay, in India, a city of such a totality is very few. It is apt to call it the 'Paradise of India'. It is one and half farsakh (league) long and half a farsakh wide and is situated on the bank of the Ganges, which is famous for the purity and sweetness of its water. It is replete with splendent bazars and magnificent buildings. On the bank of the Ganges, there stand a mosque and a Madrasa which were built times ago at the expense of one of the Qizilbash nobles and the (Mughal) governors, named Saif Khan Bahadur, who had also endowed properties for their maintenance. The letters of the holy verse: 'and the places of worship are for God (alone): So invoke not anyone along with God' reckoned according to the system of 'adad-e-jummal' give the date of the foundation of the mosque. Till date it is strong and firm; but due to lack of repairs signs of wear and tear are discernible. At present some of the wicked and silly descendants of the martyred Nawab Sirajuddowla have usurped the endowments of the Madrasa and its annexments, and have erected buildings upon it. The poor believers are too weak even to protest.

In short, I stayed in the city for some time: the gentry, holy men and the believers visited me to acquire the knowledge of religious laws. Truly speaking, in this respect, I found the resident of this city more distinguishable than those of other cities of Bangala, especially the tavern-house of Murshidabad. A larger number of the distinguished scions of the Qizilbash (Persian) extractions are also settled here and are leading a prosperous life.

In short, after a few days we set out for Faizabad. It was at Danapur about three farsakhs away from Azimabad, at midnight past, while I and my fellow-travellers were asleep, a band of robbers fell upon our vessel. On alarm, we encountered them a little but as they were in large number we could not resist them. They overcame us and barged into the vessel. Two persons with naked swords stood at the head of my bedstead and that of my steward Aqa Mohammad Husain Khorasani. I was gripped with the fear of an instantaneous death. They looted all our belongings and spared nothing, but the clothes I was wearing. By threats and intimidations, they demanded wine from

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us; but when they looked at the books, they murmured to each other that they did not appear to be drinkers. Thus, by the auspiciousness of the books I was saved from the peril. They, however, turned everything upside down to find out if some money might have been concealed somewhere in the vessel. They stripped all my companions of their clothes except Aqa Mohammad Hasan. It was about half an hour before dawn that they turned upon their heels. The next morning I returned to Azimabad. On coming to know of the occurence, the first among the friends to visit me was a Hindu Munshi Ramchand by name, who had for sometime studied the Akhlaqu-e-Nasiri under me, and expressed his grief and sorrow over what had happened to me. Amongst men of his creed, he was singularly sensible and virtuous. Thereafter came other friends to meet me.

I put up in the house of the above-mentioned Syed Kazim Ali Khan Bahadur situated on the bank of the river (Ganges). By the grace of God, and with his attention and care as also of other friends my circumstances became well-off in two or three days, but for want of a congenial companion I felt like a fish out of water, in the meantime there arrived Munshi Azizullah, one of the Munshis of the English, who was on his way to Benaras by land; and was my admirer enabsentia since I was in Dakhan.

Thus, in the last decade of revered month of Zilaqad equipped with all the necessary provisions, and having made arrangement for planquin-bearer (kahars) for my own ride and bullock-cart for carrying the attendants and luggage with permisssion to be escorted by four gunmen and accompanied by above-mentioned Munshi, we set out for Banaras. Despite the fact that Azizullah belonged to the Sunni sect, he did not fall short in showing respect and reverence (to me) in the course of our journey.

After a few days' journey we arrived at a township (named) Shahsarai, which is commonly called Shahsaram. It is a big town both in its extent and population, and contain a large number of magnificent and lofty edifices, which in the words of the holy Quran 'all in ruins to its roofs'—desolate and in state of decay. Sher Shah, a contemporary of Humayun Padsha had made this (place) the seat of his government. His tomb is also there. He had got a big lake dug in the middle of the town, and laid out an edifice with high domes containing a big court within which is located his sepulchre. Formerly, there was a bridge over the lake but with the passage of time and due to atmospheric effects, it is now in a dilapidated condition, and cannot be crossed except by boat or ferries. I went there: there were few graves in it which bore an eloquent testimony to the frailty of this world and the worthlessness of the kingship

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and the kingdom. I went atop the terrace: to an extent of the nine farsakhs (league) it was all verdant and fresh; and such a superb edifice has very scarcely come to my notice up till now.

After nine days' journey we arrived at the town of Banaras in the revered month of Zilhijja. It is one of the chief towns of the province Parag (Prayag), and is situated on the bank of the Ganges, and is one of the most sacred and holiest places of Hindu worship. They believe that within its radius of four farsakhs (leagues), the dead are immune from question-answer and, however sinful one might be, if consigned to flames on the bank of the river, he would turn into a good soul and be reborn in the frame of a virtuous and big man. Therefore, their crowd and congregation here is much more than in any other town.

The houses, apartments and multi-storeyed buildings all are constructed of *sang-e-sifid* and mortar. The lanes and bye-lanes are now so narrow that it is impossible for two persons to pass at a time. I, therefore, stayed outside the town.

On coming to know of my arrival, some of the gentlemen came to meet me and after much solicitations took me inside the town. A few days I stayed (in the town), there was so much crowd of people who kept coming to me to learn about the exposition of religious laws; and, because of the rush of the high and low and the number of vehicles at my doorstep, it was impossible for the people to pass through that way. On enquiry I was told that over a lac of Muslims, both the shias and the sunnis reside in this town. Notwithstanding the town being outwardly an abode of the unbelievers, I found its residents more religious-minded and eager to learn about the precepts of the holy law than those of the tavern-house of Murshidabad. For a few days I had been there, I had no comfort either by day or by night. The Kotwal, that is the Daroga (Police Superintendent) of the town, Mir Zulfaqar Ali, though a sunni by profession, having come to know of my arrival visited me, and did not fail in the least in setting things right for me, and making arrangement for my (onward) journey and rendering other services to me. There lived in the town, the dignified (*a'alishan*) Haji Mohammad Beg and Ali Asghar Beg, and a host of Qizilbash (Persian) who waited on me most of the time.

On the outskirts of the town is situated the tomb of Shaykh Ali Jilani, (Gilani) who had his pen-name Hazin—a progeny of the saint of the highest order and knower of the Divine secrets, Shaykh Ibrahim known as Zahid Jilani, the preceptor and spiritual guide of Shaykh Safi, the ancestor of the

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Safawid kings—May God be pleased with them! His merits and qualities are so well known that they need no mention here.

In the city (Banaras) there is a magnificent mosque on the bank of the Ganges which in olden times was a temple. It was dismantled by order of the Emperor Alamgir Aurangzeb, and the present mosque was built at its site. During the regime of the English it is in ruins and a contigent of Hindu soldiers has occupied it, where they drink and commit various sinful acts. In short it was from there that I addressed a letter to the most high in rank and exalted in dignity (*uli'ajah wala ja'igah*), the most pious, revered and respected Queen mother (*mahd-e-ulia moqadase mukarma muhtarme*) the maid of Hazrat Zehra, the illustrious mother of Nawab Wazir-ul-mamalik Asaf-ud-dowla, who has since taken refuge in divine grace and mercy (*merhamat-wa- ghofran-panah*) nestling in the garden of Paradise (*jannat rizwan aramgah*), May his grave be fragrant!, and to other concerned dignitaries and pillars of the state expressing my desire to visit Faizabad and to meet them. I handed it over to the aforesaid exalted Asgher Beg Simani to carry it like Solomon's Hoopoe to the city of the Bilquis of the age.

—Translated by A.F. Haider

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Account of a Journey to the Sources of the Jumna and Bhagirathi Rivers

James B. Fraser

The course now was nearly east, and the road became very difficult. Two large streams join the river a little way on; the *Gúmti*, and the *Heršila Gangá*. The first bears a large body of water along a most craggy and tremendous cleft in the right bank, and, we are told, takes its rise on the southeast side of a snowy hill called *Nehet*, forming part of the boundary between *Rewaen* and *Biseher*, and probably runs in a direction from south-west to north-east, or from west to east, to the north of *Benderpuch'h* and its range; it is said to be eight day's journey hence to the north-west, the road through snow, and very arduous and dangerous. The *Biseher* men who come to *Gangotrí* and the neighbourhood, either from religious motives, or to steal sheep, make use of this road when the season admits of it.

The *Heršila Gangá*, just above the other, is of less size, the chasm it runs in, as wild: it has its rise in the *Qureiro* range, and between it and the *Gúmti*, there is only a narrow slip of sharp rock near their *debouche*; the gap in the river bank, that admits these two rivers, is very remarkable for its sharp craggyness.

Just beyond, on the eastern bank, are the ruins of a village named *Cachaura*, where once a *Rana* lived who held sway over all *Tacnaur*; but some quarrel arose with the *Bhotias*, who live under the *Chinese* dominion at no great distance from hence, and these people came and destroyed the village, deposed the *Rana*, and demolished a temple, which was in considerable repute, to the God *Rais*. The *pandit* of *Gangotrí*, who was the relater, cannot say when this took place, but as it is traditional, and this species of information does not appear of long endurance among this people, it may probably not refer to a very distant period. The ruins of the *math* or temple, are still to be seen. The village *Durálí*, our stage for the night, was but a short distance onwards, and we reached it easily by 5 o'clock.

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This village, the highest in the bed of the *Bhágirat'hí*, is situated just above the confluence of the *Kerí Nullah* with the river, and is stated to be 12 *cos* from *Gangotrí*: it formerly was populous, and comparatively rich; the revenue it produced being 75 rupees annually, of which 22 were appropriated to the holy purpose of supporting the religious establishment of *Gangotrí*. In the time of the *Gorc'ha* power, 45 were thus bestowed; but, by the *pandit's* account, who related these particulars, little or nothing now arose from this source. Just opposite, on the other side of the river, is situated the village of *Mukabba*, once populous, and of its revenue (also about 75 rupees) half went to the establishment of *Gangotrí*, and half to the catching and training of hawks for the *raja's* amusement. Now, the *pandit* and his family alone, consisting of about 15 persons, remain of its whole population. The village of *Cachaura* also, till lately, produced a revenue to the crown of 75 rupees, but now it is quite desolate; and this total desertion or partial deterioration, is universal in the country. A village called *Suparga*, which formerly existed at some distance below, was presented, it is said, by *Raja* Mán Sinh when he came to bathe at the sacred spot, to the *Gangotrí* establishment. Now the *zemindars* have totally deserted it, and only the name remains. There can be but little doubt, that this defalcation in cultivation, inhabitants and general prosperity, may be referred to the iron rule of the *Gorc'ha* conquerors.

When we reached the village, no male inhabitants were to be seen, save a few old *brahmins* and decrepid old men, who, with the women and children, remained in the houses. In answer to our enquiry, as to where the others were—we were readily and unhesitatingly answered, 'that they had gone to buy corn, or to steal sheep' and in a tone, that proved they thought this a piece of business, too ordinary and common to conceal.

Just at the entrance of the village, I was struck by the sight of a gooseberry bush, a plant we had long looked for, without success; it was growing in a neglected state, but there was fruit upon it nearly ripe, though small and sour, and there could be no doubt of the identity of the plant; this nearly completes the list of the common English garden fruits, found in the hills.

July 19th—A misty morning succeeded a night of drizzling rain, and we set off for *Gangotrí* about 7 o'clock; the distance we were told is 12 *cos*. Several points were to be arranged before we began our march; the *brahmins* requested that no *mussulman* might be allowed to pass the village, which, indeed, was a measure I meant to have adopted unasked, and therefore at once agreed to. The *pandit* also represented that it was not customary to approach the sacred shrine with arms of any sort, and that every one performed this last stage with naked feet. As by the general voice it was allowed, that marauding and plunder

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were common occurrences in this neighbourhood, I did not deem it proper or safe to go totally unarmed; but agreed, that only five men should be permitted to accompany us thus accoutred, and that I should take my own gun; but that these weapons of war should be thrown aside before we got within sight of the holy spot, and deposited in a cave near it, under a guard. I also pledged myself that no use should be made of these instruments, except in case of necessity; nor any life sacrificed either by the people or myself, from the time of our leaving the village till we returned to it; moreover, that I should not carry meat of any sort, dead or alive, along with me, but feed purely on rice and bread. They did not even suggest the putting off my shoes at the village, nor could I have done so, but I promised to throw them off when entering into the precincts of the temple, or approaching the holier places, with which they were much pleased. All the *Hindus*, including the *Gorc'has*, went from hence bare foot.

For rather more than two *cos*, the road lay chiefly through a wood of large firs; a little above the bed of the river, the path was good, but here and there interrupted by a bad step. At this place we ascended the projection of a rock, which closes up the valley, by a rude, but curiously constituted set of steps, formed by pins stuck into the rock, and beams and stones laid across them. The channel of the river became deep, dark and narrow; and the path a mere devious scramble, over enormous fragments of rock from above, mingled with broken pieces of trees, interlaced with tangled *jungle*, till we reached a small retired spot, beneath some fine trees, where a cool spring, and the pleasantness of the place, induce pilgrims in general to halt. The river runs below this at a depth of about 100 yards, between two walls of solid rock, in which it has hollowed itself a bed just sufficient to contain it, and of which the breadth at the upper part is nearly the same as below, and in this trough it tumbles over a succession of small falls for a considerable way. Beyond this, the road is difficult, and frequently dangerous, passing along the face of *Scaurs*, in the beds of torrents, across rocks, and over a succession of broken ground, till we reach the top of a very ugly and dangerous descent, which is said to be six *cos* from the village, and which leads immediately down upon *Bhairamghát'í*.

At this point the *Bhágirat'hí* is divided into two branches—that which preserves the name, coming from the eastward; while the other, of a size fully equal, joins it under the name of the *Jahnevi*, from the north-east. Both these rivers run in chasms, the depth, narrowness, and wildness of which, it would be far from easy to convey an idea of; between them, a lofty crag, equal in heights to those that tower on either side above the torrents, is thrust like a wedge. The extreme preciptiousness of all of these, the roughness of their

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faces, with the wood which grows near their bases, obstructed the view, and prevented the whole being comprehended at a glance; but the distant black cliffs, topped with lofty peaks of snow, are discerned shutting up the prospect in either of the three ravines, when the clouds for a moment permit them to appear. Just at the bottom of the descent, and immediately above the junction of the two torrents, an old and crazy wooden bridge is thrown across the *Bhágirat'hí*, from one rock to the other many feet above its stream, and it is not till this point is reached, that the extraordinary nature of the place, and particularly of the rivers bed, is fully comprehended, and then is seen the stream in a state of dirty foam twisting violently, and with a mighty noise through the strangely hollowed trough of solid granite, cutting it into shapes of every sort and leaping in fearful waves over every obstacle.

The bed of the *J'ahnevi* is at least equally picturesque and fully as savage, but we had not equal opportunities for seeing it; the perpendicularity and heights of the rocky sides is perhaps greater than that of the others; this river is said to have its rise in a very lofty mountain, called *Rakesúr Stan*, situated in the dominions of China, and which is 15 days' journey from hence in a direction nearly that of its apparent course from hence, viz. north east by east, I am inclined to think it is still more easterly, and by no means so distant.

Just at the wooden bridge abovementioned, there is an overhanging rock, under which worship is performed to *Bhairamji*, and a black stone partly painted red, is the image of the God, and here not only were prayers said and worship performed, but everyone was obliged to bathe and eat bread baked by the brahmins, as preparatory to the great and effectual ablutions at the holy *Gangotrí*.

From this place we ascended the rock between the streams, by a path more curious and dangerous than any we have met with. The rock is too steep and perpendicular to afford any natural path, and the chief part is therefore artificially constructed in a manner before alluded to, by placing beams of wood and stones upon strong timbers driven into the fissures of the rock; thus forming a hanging flight of imperfect steps over the fearful gulf below; and as this sometimes has suffered from age or weather, and as sometimes the means of attaching it to the rock were scanty, or altogether awaiting the means of passing are as frequently so insufficient and hazardous, as to strike dread into those not much accustomed to such travelling—at times a leap is necessary to reach the next sure footing while the precipice and torrent gapes below; at others, all the support that presents itself to save you from this fall, is a ledge of the rock not three inches broad, with a slight bamboo, hung from some root above to take hold of. By this unpleasant path, we reached a spot on the first ledge of

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the mountain where in a thick grove of fir trees, a small temple is placed to *Bhairamji*. It is a plain white building erected by Amer Sinh T'happa, who gave a sum of money to be laid out on repairs of the road and places of worship here and at *Gangotrí*. Having paid our respects to this deity, we continued our road along the right bank of the river, by a path equally bad as that of one ascent, and still gradually ascending among fragments of rock and wood, which made our progress painful and dangerous.

Three *cos* of this description of path brought us opposite the debouche of a considerable stream called *Miání-ci-G'had*, which tumbles down a deep ravine, through the opening of which is seen the snowy range of *Miání*, with the extensive bosom of snow that feeds the stream. Just below this, we had a view of a very singular and lofty peak called *Rudru Himála Bahín*, a prodigious spire of bare rock, the top of which was enveloped in snow. Just opposite to the stream of *Miání*, we obtained bearings, both upwards and downwards of the rivers course, and for the first time the scite of *Gungotrí*, with the spot where the river arises, was pointed out by the pundit; this last was nearly directly east. The path now became very laborious and our progress very painfull. One *cos* from *Gungotrí*, and two from *Miání-ci-G'had*, we reached a spot called *Patangni*, which is noted as that where the five brothers, commonly called the *Pánduwán*, Bhím Sinh, Arjun, Yudhisht'hir, Sahadeo, and Nacula, remained for twelve years worshipping Mahadeo, after his retreat from *Lanca*. After that period they left this place and ascended *Swergárohiní*, a peak of the sacred hill whence the *Ganges* flows: there four of the brothers died, and their immortal parts ascended to heaven; but *Yudhish'thir*, without tasting the bitterness of death, or quitting his early tenement was assumed body and all. Within a gun shot of *Gangotrí*, the *Cédár Ganga* a rapid and considerable stream, said to have its rise in the *Cédár* mountain 12 *cos* distant, debouches into the *Bhágirat'hí*, and the place of confluence called *Gauri Cunda* is holy, and serves as a further preparatory ablution 'ere *Gangotrí* be approached.

The spot which bears the name of *Gangotrí*, is hid from view by the roughness of the ground, and the masses of fallen rock; so that it cannot be seen till close upon it. The hills which form the river's bed, and which the whole way from *Bhairamghát'í* are exceedingly precipitous and close, here recede a little; and without losing anything of their savage grandeur, admit somewhat of a less confined view, and more of the light of day. Just above the debouche of the *Cédár Ganga*, the bed widens into a small shingly space, in which the river rolls with great rapidity, changing its course as the floods direct it. At the gorge of this space, a bridge is thrown across, formed of two parts, the interior ends of the

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beams resting on a large rock in the center; and just above this bridge, in a bay formed in this shingly space, is situated the small temple or *Mat*, dedicated to the goddess Ganga or Bha'gi'rat'hí. In former days, there was no temple made with hands for her worship; but within these few years, as has been observed above, the piety of Amer Sinh T'happa, chief of the *Gorc'ha* conquerors, provided a sum of money (from 4 to 500 rupees) for the erection of this small building.

The temple now built, is situated about 15 feet above the stream and precisely on the sacred rock on which it is said *Bhagírat'h* used to kneel, worshipping *Mahá Deo*; it is small building of a square shape from 16 to 20 feet high, much in the usual form of pagodas, rounding in towards the top; it is very plain, painted white with small dull red mouldings, and surmounted with the usual round and scolloped ornaments of such places; from the eastern face of the square which is turned nearly to the sacred source, there is a small projection covered with a stone pent house roof, and in the eastern end of this, is situated the entrance to the pagoda; and just before this entrance there is placed a small pagoda shaped temple to *Bhairamji*. The whole is placed in a small enclosure, surrounded by a wall built of unhewn stone and lime, within which also there is a comfortable but small house built for the accommodation of the brahmins who come to officiate. Without the enclosure are two or three sheds constructed of wood, called *Dharm Salás* (or charity houses) built for the accommodation of Pilgrims who resort here; and there are many caves all around, formed by overhanging stones, which yield a shelter to those who cannot find room in the sheds.

The scene in which this holy place is situated, is worthy of the mysterious sanctity attributed to it, and the reverence with which it is regarded. There is not here the confined gloomyness of *Bhairamghát'í*; the bare and peaked cliffs that rise to the sky, yield not in ruggedness or heighth to any we have seen, their ruins lie in wild chaotic masses at their feet, more scanty wood relieves their nakedness; even the dark pine more rarely roots itself in the deep chasms which time has worn. Thus on all sides is the prospect closed, save in front to the east; where from behind a mass of bare rocky spires, four huge lofty snowy peaks arise. These are the peaks of *Rudra Himála*.

The first and most natural object of enquiry, after casting a glance over the general landscape, is to ascertain whence the river springs. Here, as at *Jamnotrí*, we were told, that no mortal has, or can go further in its bed towards its source, than this spot; and this difficulty is indeed sufficiently apparent. I made a trial to gain a point about twelve furlongs off, beyond the temple, for the purpose of observing the course of the river, and of seeing *Gangotrí* in

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another point of view; but having, with considerable difficulty, made my way for some distance over the unsteady fragments, at the risk of being precipitated into the stream, I was forced to turn back; beyond that point, the precipices descend more abruptly to the water's edge: and, in all probability, it would be nearly impossible to make way along their faces. Crossing the stream, to take advantage of the easier places that may occur on either side, is out of the question: it is too large and rapid;—and climbing higher up the mountain side is equally so, for the crags increase in ruggedness and steepness till they end in snow. It may be, that enterprising persons remaining at this spot for several days or weeks, might explore or form a path towards the source, for time and patient perseverance can do much, and has in fact, formed the path hither; but I am convinced not only of the difficulty of the thing itself, but that it would not be easy to overcome the reluctance of the hill people to ascend, whose assistance would be so necessary to strangers, and whom superstition and religious prejudice have hitherto kept below.

The source is described as about 5 miles horizontal distance from the temple, in a direction nearly S.E. 85; and it is, in all probability, chiefly supplied by the melting of the great bosom of snow that terminates the valley, and lies between the peaks of the mountain spoken of above. This mountain, reckoned the loftiest and largest of the snowy range in this quarter, and probably yielding to none in the whole *Himála*, obtains the name of *Rudra Himála*, and is supposed to be the throne or residence of Mahadeo himself. It has five principal peaks called *Rudra Himála, Brahmápurí, Vishnupurí, Udgárí Cantá*, and *Swergárohiní*. These form a sort of semicircular hollow, of very considerable extent, which is filled with eternal snow; from which, and from the various ravines of this hollow, the principal part of the stream flows. Probably there may be smaller hollows to the right above *Gangotrí*, which supply a portion. Such is the amount of the pundits account, and I believe it to be consistent with truth, for the following reasons. Our ascent from the village of *Suc'hi*, which is itself high among the hills, has been great, and from *Duráli*, rapid; so much so as to leave no doubt that this spot is far elevated above the level of the countries beyond the snowy hills, indeed our perpendicular distance from the snowy region was very inconsiderable, and were it not that the heat of the places is increased by the confinement of the suns rays, and their reflexion from so much rock, it is probable that snow would continue lying here continually. The cold consequently is great here at night. The river *Setlej* certainly comes through the *Himála* range; but when we were upon its banks, and at a very considerable distance within the range of snow, it was a long days journey, or probably equal

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to 12 miles of regular gradual ascent from the river to the region of snow, and the heat both night and day was intolerable; nay at *Serán*, 3 miles above its bed the cold was inconsiderable. It must then be allowed that the difference of altitude indicated by these circumstances is a strong presumptive proof that the *Bhágirat'hí* does not come through the snowy range, but rises in them.

If it does not come through the *Himálaya*, its course cannot be far from hence. The snowy peaks extend to no great breadth; they generally consist of one lofty ridge cut into high peaks and deep ravines, and project several equally irregular ridges on either side towards the north east and south west; these inferiour ridges are never equal in heighth to the parent mountain, but nevertheless at times shoot up masses of great magnitude, whence in their turn diverge other mountains that either themselves or by their branches reach the plain.

The breadth of the mountainous region may probably occupy a space of from eighty to one hundred miles: the grounds for supposing this to be the extent of that space, are not only our own observation, but the information we have received from different and intelligent persons, relative to routes through the passes. Thus reasoning from probabilities, observation and information, *Rudra Himála* is at least removed to the center of the snowy range, and it is fair to conclude that the land, mountainous and elevated as it is, rather falls than rises to the north and north east of this mountain. This is confirmed by the pundit, and those zemindars who have been accustomed to view the country from lofty situations on either side of the glen of the *Bhágirat'hí*. No one seemed in the least to doubt the fact, that the river had its rise in the aforesaid hollow of snow; and some went so far as to assert that, when climbing in search of stray sheep, they had seen the glen of the river ending thus, and could discern the deep ravine through which it trickles down into its bed from the snowy *bason*: and further declare that no very considerable stream appeared to join it from any other quarter. The road before adverted to, by which the *Biseher* men go to *Cédár* for salt, proceeding behind this mountain was quoted by the pundit as a proof, that the river did not come from a greater distance, and he mentioned several corroborating accounts given by *Bhotias*, who had travelled much in this quarter.

To all this may be added, that the stream of the *Bhágirat'hí*, though large and rapid, is perhaps not greater than may be accounted for by the large mass of snow that supplies it, acted on by rain and sun, at a time of year when both have greatest effect; and that few streams of any consequence join it above the *Jáhneví*; the *Shewri-Gad'h*, the *Miáni Gad'h*, the *Bougi Gad'h* and the *Cédar Gangá*, being the only ones from the south east, while from the north-west

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side, not a single stream larger than a mere rill, falls into it; all of which renders it probable, that few if any *nullahs* unite with the river above *Gangotrí*, and that it really is formed as above described.

It has been said, that the appearance of the bed of the river and hills closing up our view confirmed the information we received. About two furlongs beyond *Gangotrí*, a point on the left from the northward shuts out the immediate view of the stream; beyond this, probably about one mile, (or less of horizontal distance) a point from the southward stretches down behind the former, hiding a larger and higher portion of the bed and sides; beyond this the course is to all appearance straight for a considerable way to the southward of east, and a very rough craggy ridge shooting into sharp points forms the eastern bank, and ends in a point, round which the river again appears to turn, and which stretches down from *Swergárohiní*.

Swergárohiní is the nearest of the five peaks, and forms the western point of the great snowy hollow. *Rudra Himála* forms the eastern point: but from it a great shoulder runs down to the south westward, that as far as we could judge gives off, or ends in the mountains we are surrounded with, and forms a great unbroken though unequal snowy ridge, that bounds and confines the glen of the *Bhágirat'hí*.

The other peaks mentioned above form different points in the back of this immense hollow, and all together compose one of the most romantic as well as largest mountains, perhaps in the world. The above discussion and explanation may seem tedious and excessive; but when the object is to throw every possible light on even the remotest, and least important part, of the course of this venerable river, tediousness may perhaps be pardoned.

The old popular idea, that the *Ganges* issues from a rock like a cow's mouth, (*Gae Muk'h*) did not fail to occur to me, and enquiries were made into the origin of this fable. When it was mentioned, the pundit laughed and observed, that most of those pilgrims who came from the plains put the same question in several shapes; one asking whether it did not take its rise from the leaves of a sacred birch, (*Bhojpatr*;) others from its roots: and others again supposing, that the stream really and visibly came down from heaven. But he gravely assured us that no such thing happened, and that the river, in truth, came from the snow as above mentioned. He then gave the account above detailed, adding, that it was the true one given in the *Sást'ras*, and that he was convinced of its correctness not only for that reason, but (shewing the landscape before us, and pointing to the five peaks, as in evidence of what he advanced), because, as might be seen, it could not well be otherwise.

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Letter to a Friend

Honoria Lawrence

We are in a pinnace. It is fifty-five feet long but not drawing above two feet of water, with two masts, and rigging somewhat like a yacht, but ruder. It has sixteen oars, but we proceed chiefly by sailing and tacking. The pinnace has a poop, covering about two-thirds of its length, and forming the cabins. One fifteen feet square; the other fifteen by twenty feet and about seven feet high. These two rooms venetianed all round, having a *purdah* or curtain let down from the outside during the heat of the day. The heat has been oppressive, the thermometer being 90° and 92°. We have had one rather severe squall, but I have not yet seen anything like the violence of the elements that I expected in this climate. Indeed I think our western ideas of the horrors of India are vastly exaggerated. I have not yet seen a snake, except one in the water, though I am not yet reconciled to the great cockroaches which creep out from the crevices of an evening. Nor was I much pleased to see a scorpion walk deliberately across the floor a few days ago, nor to find a centipede making a bed of the slipper I was about to put on. One of my greatest annoyances is the prickly heat, which is a red rash breaking out over the body with an infinity of little watery specks excessively irritating.

We are, on board, about forty souls, ourselves, our servants, the *manjee* (commander) and crew. The boatmen are called *dandees*, from *dand*, an oar, and the profession is followed by both Hindus and Mussulmanns. Our men are dark, spare and active, most of them young, for their work does not favour long life. They wear mainly a waist-cloth and small skull cap of white or coloured cotton. The *manjee* is in no way distinguished from those under him, except that instead of pulling the ropes, he steers and gives orders, which he delivers in a sort of loud, prolonged chant audible at a good distance.

There is no part of the costume where the natives shew such variety of taste as in the arranging of the hair. And this does not as far as I can see depend

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on religious distinction. Some cover the head with a load of folded cloth, others wear no covering on it, and have the hair cropped close. Some wear little caps and the hair reaching down to the shoulders, where it is cut square across. Others have a broad line shaven from the forehead to the nape of the neck, and others cut off the hair above the forehead from ear to ear. And it is not uncommon to see the whole head shaven except one long tuft on the crown. The Mussulmanns have generally fine beards. But the Hindoos almost always shave theirs.

You would be astonished what absolute rags are the sails of country boats, and still more so that these tatters do carry along the vessel. Except in boats that are partly of European build, the bamboo is one of the chief materials, forming masts, helms, oars, spars, anchors. If there be no wind, we track by a rope fastened to the mast and pulled by a set of the *dandees*, who walk on the bank. Sometimes they are obliged to go through the water, and even to swim a considerable distance. They seem to feel neither heat nor moisture and they roll about in the river, their grinning black faces appearing above the water.

Often have I seen a man wash in the stream the piece of cloth that forms his dress, wring it out and then wrap it round his body, while the *manjee* shouts to them calling them his '*babas*', or children.

They are all a most loquacious race, and their chief pleasure seems to be smoking a '*hubble-bubble*' or pipe, a cocoa-nut shell or small hollow globe of wood which has a long tube inserted at the upper part, with a little earthen saucer on the top, where the lighted tobacco is placed. The globe is filled with water and from one side of it projects another tube, to which the mouth is applied and thus the smoke is inhaled through the water. The *hubble-bubble* is the chief refreshment of all the hard working classes, as the *hookah* is the grand recreation of the idle. We sail or track along until sunset, when we lie to, close to shore, and anchor, or rather *lagao*. That is: several ropes are put out from the boat, each having at the end a strong bamboo stake which is driven into the ground, and so we are secured for the night.

As soon as we are fairly *lagaoed* all hands are at work; some chopping firewood, intent on improving their supper; some going into the water carrying a net stretched between two bamboos shaped like the letter Y, and on his head a light basket into which he puts the little fishes as he catches them; others who are further advanced, lying down after supper to rest. The strong red glare of the fire, falling on their bronzed figures, and lighting up their bright, black faces looking very picturesque. Of a moonlight night they sometimes sit up very late, talking and laughing; the wit among them telling stories, or the whole group discussing the price of grain.

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We get up about daylight and after a cup of coffee go on deck, where we sit till the sun drives us in. We then dress and are ready for breakfast at nine o'clock. During the day we read, write and otherwise occupy ourselves till towards five o'clock, when we dine, and afterwards go on deck. When the pinnace comes to, we land and ramble or sit on the shore till eight o'clock. Then we have tea, and busy ourselves till ten o'clock. I should like our voyage to last for months, it is so free from care, so unshackled, so independent of any enjoyment beyond what we have in each other's society, intellectual pursuits and the fair face of Nature.

We have sometimes met a *budgerow*, and seeing a white face has caused us all sorts of speculations. A *budgerow* is smaller generally than a pinnace, and more foreign in its aspect. It is a light and speedy vessel, but it does not admit of cooking on board. And where there is a separate cook boat, people have often the pleasure of seeing it wind-locked all day on one side of the river, while they are detained on the other.

We have seldom seen the Ganges at its full breadth because of the many islands which divide it into channels, sometimes not more than half a mile wide. Besides, it winds so much as to look more like a succession of lakes, than a continuous stream. The banks have been a good deal varied but their present clothing is *moonge* or *jeplassee*, a tall coarse grass ten or twelve feet high with a feathery head of white downy seed, presenting in places a surface so unbroken, so unspotted as to look like a heavy fall of snow. Balsam, purple, white, red and variegated abound in the hedges, and are planted round temples and tombs. The blossoms are laid as offerings on the shrines, and are afterwards thrown into the river, which I have seen quite enamelled with them.

What would you say to see the boatmen who pull us along by a rope push their way through a whole wilderness of *dhatura*, which also hangs its beautiful bells in every hedge and nook? Some of its blossoms are tinted round the edge with a reddish purple. Every variety of cactus and aloe is used for fences, and when well planted they are quite impenetrable. There are beautiful creepers festooning from tree to tree, or matting over the ground, some of the convolvulus family, others with a small bright blue blossom of the *digitalis* species. We see multitudes of two or three varieties of the palm, which have the characteristics of smooth, slender stem, and round head of drooping leaves, but lack the graceful feathery leaves and curved outlines of the coco. All trees of this sort shoot from the earth, as if they had attained their full growth underground, the completely formed head rising from the ground like the crown of a pine and the stem gradually lengthening. The peculiar mode of growth of

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these plants, reminds me of Milton's idea of the fully formed animals rising out of the earth, at their creation.

Barrackpore is on the right bank of the river, on the opposite side stands Serampore, a Danish Settlement. We did not land there but it looked a clean compact town, the buildings chiefly white and the whole having a more European air than anything else I have seen in Asia. Here is the celebrated Baptist Mission which in the work of translation and every other effectively useful measure leaves far behind every other mission in India. When Doctor Marshman came out to this country, our government refused him any countenance or even toleration. He therefore put himself under the Danish protection, and for years he has been a burning and shining light in the land. His son is following in his steps, and the printing-press at Serampore is constantly sending forth useful publications and reprints. It issues a weekly paper called *The Friend of India*, exceedingly well conducted, a decidedly religious paper, but temperate and liberal, and edited with such good sense and sound judgement that it is always quoted with respect by the other periodicals, which manifest a very different spirit.

The Indian Press was relieved from censorship only three years ago by Sir Charles Metcalfe who was temporary Governor-General then. The newspapers in this Presidency at least are universally of what is termed liberal politics, that is, opposed to the Tory party at home and generally advocating an enlarged policy towards the natives. But except *The Friend of India* they are generally of a very low stamp, full of gross personalities and miserable attempts at wit.

People generally leave home so young that their political predilections have not taken a very strong bias, or they have been here so long that the actors they remember have passed away, and the newcomers excite but a vague feeling of interest. The terms, that 'Scoundrel O'Connel', 'that noble Duke of Wellington', 'the enlightened policy of Lord Mulgrave towards Ireland', 'the faction that would overthrow the Church and the Throne' though used here, do not at all convey the pungency of party spirit that they indicate with us.

In the morning Henry took me to see the park and parade ground [of Barrackpore]. The newest objects to me were the Sepoys going through their military exercises, and a stud of elephants. The native troops wear a uniform like the English and very ugly it looks on them.* To my civil eye they seem to

* When Henry Lawrence formed the Corps of Guides he clothed them in khaki and gave them comfortable native dress. They were the first troops in the world to wear khaki.

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perform their exercises with great precision. Their lines appeared to abound with holy men, whose residence is always indicated by a little red triangular flag placed on a tall slender bamboo. As to the elephants, I was quite astonished to see about twenty, young and old, some standing in stalls under covered sheds, some taking their food and cropping great branches of trees much as we eat water cress.

We continued our course up the river without adventure till September 12th, when we reached Berhampore. Here there is a great manufactory of silk, chiefly of a light and thin, but very strong description. Before we had been an hour lagaoed, we were visited by the *copra-wallahs*, cloth merchants bringing silks for sale. Each opened his bundle praising his own goods and disparaging his neighbours, thrusting a piece of silk towards us, and recommending it '*Scatch plat*' (Scotch Plaid) or '*Bailatee*' (English) or whatever he thought would be most acceptable. One day at Cossipore a *boccas-wallah* (box man, pedlar) was displaying his goods. Mrs. Hutchinson took up some stockings, saying to him in a tone which I suppose he thought disparaging, 'These are English?' The man spoke a little of our tongue, and immediately said 'It's, Mem Sahib, not Anglees. Liverpool, Mem Sahib, Liverpool'. I hate buying from the natives, they always ask twice or three times as much as the thing is worth, or as they mean to take, and then when they are offered less they hold up their clasped hands saying '*Hum gurreeb admee*,' 'I'm a poor man,' looking all the while as sly as possible, and as if they enjoyed having taken in the '*Feringhees*' (Christians, a corruption, I fancy, of Franks).

September 16th

We entered the Great Ganges and our *manjee* came to ask a *bugis*, or present, for *Gunga-gee* (Mr. Ganges).

During this week we had some glorious sunsets, sometimes the sun rushed down like a red-hot ball through the clear blue sky till it dipped behind the hills, rapidly sinking till but a golden speck remained and then disappearing, to be succeeded by a rose coloured tint, bathing the whole western sky through which the evening star shone like a lamp. Other evenings the sky was heaped up with masses of purple clouds, the silvery sun lighting up their edges. This is constantly succeeded by lightning, indeed I do not recollect one evening since I came to the country without vivid flashes, generally to the westward. We are in the land for enjoying all skiey influences. And we have no barring and

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bolting out of these beauties but can at any hour go to the verandah, or the tent door to look out. One feature however, I miss, the dark masses of cloud which at home we so often see at night, sailing across a clear sky. Nor do we here see 'a sable cloud turn forth her silver lining on the night'. As far as I have seen in this climate, the nocturnal heavens are either perfectly transparent or covered with a mist more or less dense.

As we advance up the river, the number of boats increases. Sometimes when we go on deck on a morning there are fifty or sixty sail in sight. Relieved against the red eastern sky, they remind me of the spectre ship seen by the 'Ancient Mariner'.

September 20th

I was amused at seeing a herd of buffaloes swim across. They resemble large coarse dark grey cows excepting in the setting on of the head, which in a buffalo is very peculiar. The forehead is nearly on a level with the back, so that the long curved horn lies almost on the shoulders, and the chin is poked straight out. The creature has always the look of staring at you with a vacant enquiring countenance. And there is something very ludicrous in its air. They swim well, the heads alone appearing above water, and the driver holding by the tail of the hindermost.

September 21st

Off Peer Point. Peer means a holy man, and Peer Point is the residence of one. *Fakeers* or religious mendicants belong to both Mussalmanns and Hindus, whose faith is in many things blended, though there must always be a grand distinction between the eaters and the worshippers of the cow. On the summit of one rock overhanging the stream, was the *fakeer's* hut, and a little to the left, up the hill, one Hindu temple and the ruins of another, quite overgrown by a *peepul* tree, a kind of aspen, which strikes its roots into every crack and fissure of a building, and soon loosens the stones. The seeds are carried by birds, and are often deposited on the bark of another tree, where they take root, and completely smother their abode. There is among the natives a superstition that if a man who has planted a tree, dies in debt, the creditor comes in the form of a *peepul*, roots itself in the tree and destroys it.

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September 29th

Reached Monghyr a city once famous in Oriental story, and fortified strongly after the native fashion, with a fort having thick mud walls, faced with brick and a deep wide ditch. The brick facings are fast going to decay, and the *peepul* is rooting itself in the turrets.

There are several *ghats*. *Ghat* means a passage, but is particularly applied to the passages leading down to a river; these are sometimes merely rude steps cut in the clay, but the better sort consist of a regular flight of stone and brick steps, with a gateway at the top. One of these at Monghyr attracted my attention. The steps were at the early hour we saw them crowded with people. Strings of women to draw water, clothed in their graceful flowing attire, their wrists and ankles decorated with ornaments, which though generally mere baubles, are not the less picturesque. Each balanced on her head a *ghurrah*, the red earthen vessel in which they draw water, and which seems formed to be inconvenient, being shaped like an orange with a wide circular [rim?]: it rolls about at a touch. However it is the only water pitcher used, so I suppose it has its advantages. Down [the women] were filing. Some were stooping to fill their vessels, others were placing on their heads those already full.

In the shallow water were troops of bathers, men, women and children, all paddling and swimming about, like so many frogs; some who had emerged from the bathe were drying and twisting up their long hair. Others were washing their *cummerbunds* (waistclothes) by beating them against a stone and others, who had finished this operation, were girding on their still wet clothes.

September 24th [*sic*]

The Hindu and the Mussulman religions read us a lesson as to public acts of charity, and were the Christian name to be swept from India tomorrow, it would leave few memorials in the shape of works for the good of the natives, such as the digging of tanks, sinking of wells and planting of topes.

Within a few days there were two deaths among our crew: one poor old creature had looked dying from the time we set out. Poor old man! He had no relatives on board, and the other *dandees* would hardly give him water to drink, and only interfered to prevent his taking nourishment from us 'because he was a Hindu'. It was pitiable to see the withered shrunken form lying on the deck, hardly covered by a dirty blanket, and most painful to feel that we could

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do nothing for him. I was quite relieved when he died, and his remains were thrown overboard. And was there an immortal spirit sojourning in that form? In the perplexity that will arise from such a sight, there is but one resting place for the mind, 'Shall not the judge of all the earth do right?'

The other death was of a young man, son to one of the *dandees*. He lay for several days nearly insensible. His father's grief was very affecting. The old man used to sit on deck hour after hour supporting his Baba's head, appealing to him in the most wailing tones, and weeping bitterly. His comrades too in this case shewed feeling; one after another would come and sit by him, but the patient could not be roused from his lethargy. He had high fever on him, a lightening pulse, hot skin, and swollen throat, but because he was insensible to what went on, and did not speak, they all declared it was not fever but that a spirit had got into him, and they would not allow him to take medicine from us. Night after night, when we lay to, 'Wise men' were brought from the shore to exorcise the spirit, but as you may suppose the poor sufferer died under such treatment. Him they buried, and when all was over, the bereaved old parent used of an evening to sit apart on deck, not caring to prepare his food, but 'put his face between his knees' and looked indeed as if his 'occupation was gone'.

October 5th

At Dinapoor we went on board in the evening in the midst of wind and rain, and all night the gale continued increasing. We were most uncomfortable for the two following days. The pinnace pitched to and fro on her moorings and our goods tumbled about the cabin. Having no glass windows we were obliged to keep the Venetians closed to exclude the rain. The air felt like a wet blanket, and the clothes we put on of a morning seemed as if they had been soaked in spray. I felt as if I had been dipped in a honey pot.

At Revelganj we left the pinnace. Set off at three p.m. in palinquins. The night was beautiful but the roads were all but impassable. The storm last week laid the country under water. The man who had posted our bearers reckoned the stages differently from those who carried us, and in the middle of the night we were set down, the men refusing to take us any further; after some difficulty, they did carry us to the next stage. We reckoned on reaching our halting place by eight in the morning. At nine, however, we were still short of it, and as the sun was not very hot, we stopped in a grove of bamboos. Among the

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beauties of the vegetable world, this is conspicuous, from one root or bunch of roots, scores and hundreds of stems arise to the height of sixty or eighty feet, each perfectly straight tapering to the top, feathered with bunches of long narrow leaves and leaning from the centre outwards; so that the clump has the shape of a hearse-plume. But in the aspect of the bamboo, there is nothing funereal. It is a bright green, its stems covered with a thin verdant bark, beneath which is the beautiful natural yellow varnish of the cane. This tree is the resort of fireflies. At night they seem like drops of light shaken from the branches.

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On the Ganges

E.B. Havell

'Arise! The breath of life hath come back to us—the darkness is gone, the light approacheth! Ushas hath opened a path for Surya, the Sun, to travel; now our days will be lengthened. Singing the praises of the brightening morn, the priest, the poet, ariseth with the web of his hymn. Bounteous maiden, shine upon him who praiseth thee; spread upon us the gift of life and children, thou who givest heroic sons and wealth of kine and horses.... Mother of the gods! Revelation of the glory of the Infinite! Banner of sacrifice, magnificent Ushas, shine forth—arise! Shower thy blessings upon our prayers, and make us chief among the people.'

—Rig-Veda, Hymn to the Dawn, I. 113.

The traveller who wishes to realize the magnificence of Benares on the river-side, and to catch some reflection of that Vedic brightness which still shines through all that is sordid and vulgar in the modern city, must be at Dasâsamedh Ghât before the first streak of dawn. This is what he may see as he floats slowly down the river on a December morning:—

There is a coppery glow on the eastern horizon; the Ashvins, twin heralds of the dawn, are rising. Curling wreaths of evaporation rise from the placid river, and a blanket of white mist lies over the great sandy waste, laid bare by the shrinking of the monsoon flood. King Soma, the Moon, is sinking slowly behind the ghâts, and in the dim light of his silvery rays the massive monasteries and palaces, built by devout Hindu princes, loom mysteriously out of the mist, and seem to rise like a gigantic fortress wall, sheer from the water's edge. A few boats are crossing the river bringing passengers to the holy city from the unhallowed ground on the opposite shore, where no Hindu will care to die, for fear of being re-incarnated as an ass.

The light brightens as Ushas, the lovely dawn-maiden, beloved of the Vedic poets, clad in robes of saffron and rose-colour, throws open the doors of the sky. Now the details of the ghâts can be more clearly distinguished—the

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colossal flights of stone steps, great stone piers and wooden platforms jutting out into the sacred stream, dotted over with palm-leaf umbrellas, like gigantic toad-stools, under which the *ghâtiyas* are sitting to render various services to the bathers—the countless spires of Hindu temples, dominated by the lofty minarets of Aurangzib's mosque. At last, Surya, the Sun, appears, glowing with opal fire above the cloudy bars of night. The miasmatic mists, like evil spirits—the wicked Asuras—shrink and shrivel and vanish into thin air, as he pierces them through and through and flings his victorious rays across the river, lighting up the recesses of the cave-like shrines, flashing on the brass and copper vessels of the bathers and on the gilded metal flags and crescents which surmount the temples of Shiva. It seems, at first, as if the whole amphitheatre, about two miles in circuit, glittering in the sunlight, were one vast sun-temple: the priests, the Brahmins who are muttering the holiest of their *mantras,* the mysterious sun-invocation from the Rig-Veda—the famous Gâyatrî*—the priestesses, the women whose *saris* repeat the colours of the dawn, fast fading now in the white light of day; the votive-offerings, the golden marigolds and rose-petals which are piled in baskets on the ghât steps, and float on the surface of the water.

But this is not the simple nature-worship of the early Aryan patriarchs, who three thousand years before recited their odes to Ushas, Surya, and Agni, lighted the sacred fire, and pressed the *soma*-juice, on the banks of the Ganges. The smoke which ascends from Manikarnika Ghât is from the funeral pyres of dead Hindus. Two vultures in mid-stream are fighting over a carcass, perhaps the corpse of a sannyâsî which was thrown into the river a few days ago. It is Shiva, the Destroyer, the principle of Life in Death, who is now worshipped at Benares, under his symbol of the serpent and his phallic emblem, which appears in every temple and is piled in thousands in the shrines along the ghâts. And, truly, the whole scene presents a wonderful picture of the Hindu conception of the Divine essence: on every ghât an ever-changing multitude of men, women, and children; cattle sunning themselves on the steps, goats and monkeys climbing on the cornices of the temples; kites, pigeons, and parrots flying overhead—but, here, a corpse laid down by the water's edge; a young

* It has been translated as follows:—'Let us adore the light of the Divine Sun. May it enlighten our minds.' But in Hindu ritual a mystic significance has been attached to it as a *mantram* especially addressed to the Supreme Soul—Brahman. It is said that Brahmâ composed it and taught it to Indra, who taught it to Yama: Yama taught it to Shiva, who taught it to the Brahmins.

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woman distracted, her head buried in her mother's lap, and three sad-eyed grand-dames, wrapped in widows' *saris,* gazing dreamily into space. Yonder, the funeral pyres where three more corpses are already burning.

If we observe the bathers more closely, we can see that, besides the ordinary ablutions, many of them are performing mysterious rites of different kinds. Some are saluting the sun by splashing water towards it with both hands, or pouring out water from vessels of various shape, of brass, copper, and of a kind of cocoa-nut shell. Others take up water in the palms of their hands and pour it over the top of their heads. This is to free the body from the pollution of sins. Again, others, wearing the sacred *upavita,* or Brahminical thread, will first change it from the right shoulder to the left, and then, taking up water in the right hand, they will let it fall over their extended fingers. Next, placing the thread on their necks, they will let the water run over the side of the hand, between the thumb and bent forefinger. These are rites addressed to the Devas and Rishis—the gods and the sages. Many are counting the beads of their rosaries, muttering some mysterious formulary, others are rubbing their bodies with ashes from the sacrificial fire, or putting the symbol of Shiva or Vishnu on their foreheads. Here you will see a Brahmin performing what is known as 'the exercise of breathing' (prânâyama). Stopping the right nostril with the thumb, he expels the breath through the left. Then he inhales through the left nostril, and compressing it inhales through the right. Finally he stops inspiration completely with thumb and forefinger, and holds his breath as long as he can. You will see him later on cover his right hand with his cloth, or thrust it into a red bag. He then begins to make symbolic signs with his fingers and thumb to represent the ten incarnations of Vishnu. The words he is muttering in undertones, lest the uninitiated or low-caste should overhear, are *mantras,* sacred texts and formulas, passages from the Vedas, the names or attributes of deities repeated in various ways; or invocations to the Supreme Being in his endless manifestations, prefixed by the mystic syllable AUM, representing the Hindu trinity—Brahmâ, the Creator, Vishnu, the Preserver, and Shiva, the Destroyer, or the three worlds—Earth, Air, and Heaven. All these complicated ceremonies form part of the Brahmin's *sandhya,* the form of prayer which he is enjoined to repeat three times daily—in the morning, at mid-day, and in the evening. But the *sandhya* is something more than prayer. It is a spiritual exercise which is believed to free the individual human soul from earthly contaminations, to place it in direct relation with the super-physical world, and to prepare it for the ultimate goal of all Hindu ritual—meditation. These rites and *mantras,* according to Hindu theories, are based on the science of

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the worlds invisible; but to attain the desired end they must be performed with absolute exactitude. Every *mantra,* every movement, even the order and sequence of each ceremonial act, have their proper mystical significance. A wrong word, mispronunciation or false intonation, an error in the order or manner of the performance will vitiate the efficacy of the whole and bring misfortune on the performer. Hence the intense earnestness and absorption with which the bathers go through these ceremonies. Their usual curiosity at the sight of a European stranger is entirely suppressed; they seem not to see the passing boats or to heed the inquisitive traveller. Daily on the banks of the Ganges the pious Brahmin, who observes the strict rule of the twice-born caste, fulfils with the most scrupulous exactitude the prescribed order and detail of his *sandhya,* laid down by traditions jealously guarded through thousands of years. Then with mind and body thus prepared, folding his yellow robe about him, he will sit like a living Buddha motionless on the edge of the sacred river, with closed eyes and an expression of profound tranquility on his face, absorbed in meditation on the Supreme Soul, Brahman, the Only Reality—THAT WHICH IS.

It is not to be supposed that every bather goes through the complicated ritual which I have just described, or that every Hindu on the banks of the Ganges takes the high spiritual stand-point of the philosophic Brahmin. Almost every sect and caste of Hinduism are represented among the thousands of worshippers, differing in race, language, and customs, who daily throng the ghâts. Many are simple, ignorant peasants, coming on a pilgrimage to the sacred city, who go through the traditional form of *sandhya* adopted by their caste, or only repeat a *mantra,* or mystic formula, prescribed for them by their Brahmin *gurus,* acting as their spiritual physicians. Others, again, are there in fulfilment of a vow, or to cleanse themselves by bathing from some ceremonial pollution. High-caste and low-caste, Brahmin and Sudra, bathe side by side, for the holy Ganges, descending from heaven and falling over Shiva's brow, not only effaces caste distinctions, but affords a panacea for most of the ills, bodily and spiritual, which afflict the distressed Hindu. The water is taken in brass and copper vessels for use in the endless ceremonies of the household, for sprinkling on holy shrines, or for drinking. It is carried away by pilgrims in sealed jars to their distant homes, for a few drops of the precious liquid on a dying man's lips have all the virtues of the sacred stream itself. Bathing in the Ganges is a part of many domestic ceremonies. You may observe a young couple, lately married, entering the water hand in hand, a corner of the bride's *sari* tied to the bridegroom's cloth; or perhaps a gray-haired pair, who thus

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celebrate an anniversary, or return thanks for recovery from illness—praying that in their next incarnations on earth they may be happily united once again.

Happy is the Hindu who dies in Benares, for he is transported at once to Shiva's Himalayan paradise, on Mount Kailâsa, north of Lake Mânasa, where the great three-eyed ascetic, seeing the past, the present and the future, sits in profound meditation—the type of spiritual power gained by restraint of bodily passions. To win this easy passport to heaven, old men and women, who have left the world behind them, come to spend their last days within the boundaries of Shiva's city, devoting themselves entirely to the prescribed observances of the Brahmin ritual. Some of the principal funeral rites take place on the banks of the Ganges. The nearest relatives of the deceased carry the body to the river, and place it by the water's edge, either near to the burning ghât or close by the ghât where he or she would daily come to bathe. When the last offices of the dead have been performed by the relatives, the corpse is placed on the funeral pyre, prepared by the low-caste Doms at the burning ghât, who, however, are not allowed to touch any but the bodies of people of their own caste.

There are two exceptions to the ordinary rule of cremation of the dead. A *sannyâsî,* the Brahmin who, after passing through the stages of studentship and householdership has renounced a worldly life and entered upon the strict ascetic rule of his religion, is thereby freed from the pollutions which infect the common clay, and his body after death is considered too holy to require the purification of the funeral pyre. The strangest sight of all to be seen along the ghâts is the sannyâsî's corpse, tenderly carried down by his disciples or other Brahmins of his sect, then posed like a bronze idol on the steps, garlanded and reverently saluted, while the temple musicians blow the sacred conch and beat the drums to announce that another human soul has finished the painful cycle of transmigration on earth, and is about to re-enter into union with the Absolute. The body, placed between two large flat stones, is afterwards removed to a boat and thrown into the river, opposite to the shrine where the sannyâsî had been accustomed to worship.

The other exception to the rule of cremation is in the case of bodies of Hindus who have died of small-pox. According to the weird imaginings of Puranic Hinduism, they are supposed to become possessed by Sitala, the goddess of small-pox, one of the manifestations of the Destroyer, and the goddess would be offended if Agni, the god of Fire, drove her from her habitation.

It would be impossible to describe, or even to enumerate, all the rites and ceremonies which can be observed along the ghâts, changing according to the day, the month, or the occasion of the numerous Hindu festivals. The

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most beautiful of all the latter is the Diwâlî, or Feast of Lamps, in honour of Lakshmî, the goddess of Fortune, at the end of the month of Kartik (October–November). In the evening, when the short Eastern gloaming is merging into night, numbers of girls and young women, graceful as Greek nymphs in their many-coloured *saris,* come silently down to the ghâts bearing little earthen lamps, which they light and carefully set afloat. Then with eager faces they watch them carried away on the rippling surface of the water, still shimmering with opalescent tints from the last rays of the after-glow. For if a tiny wavelet should upset the frail craft, or if the light should flicker and go out, it bodes misfortune in the coming year. But if the light burns strong and well, till the lamp is borne far away by the current in mid-stream, happiness is in store for her who launched it on the waters. By the time the twilight fades there are hundreds of twinkling lights dotted over the river, as if holy Ganga had borrowed the stars from heaven, whence she came, to adorn her earthly robes. The buildings, platforms, and steps along the shore now gleam with rows of lamps which the pious elders have lighted for their worship. Our boat drifts slowly down the stream, through the fitful glimmer of Lakshmî's fragile fleet, which magnifies the lofty piles towering above the ghâts into some gigantic citadel, built by the Djinns of Eastern legends. Below the Observatory the lamps get fewer and fewer, and near Manikarnika the whole scene fades away, as the lurid glare of the funeral pyres flashes across the water, amidst the inky blackness of the burning ghât. Dark figures are crouching on the great smoke-begrimed piers which flank the ghât, and demoniacal forms appear moving to and fro between the flaming heaps. A horrid crackling noise arises from the burning wood. From the darkness up above comes the raucous note of a temple conch, and the booming of drums.

Presently a strangely familiar sound comes floating on the still night air, like a Gregorian chant with its slow and solemn cadence. In a distant monastery high above us the Brahmins are chanting the old sacrificial hymns, the Sâm-Ved, which the Aryan priests may have chanted here thirty centuries ago—still held so holy that it is sacrilege for our impure ears to listen. They are singing the praises of Rudra, the Mighty, the Terrible, lord of sacrifices, who has a thousand eyes, and carries a thousand quivers full of arrows of destruction.

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CONTEMPORARY TRAVEL WRITING

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The Way to Mirzapur

Eric Newby

He who utters 'Gange, Gange' even from a distance of hundreds of miles, becomes purified from all sins and attains Vaikuntha, the world of Vishnu.

—Devi Bhagavatum.

We left Allahabad on the last day of the year to travel down the river to Mirzapur. It was only fifty-five miles by train but more like ninety by the river.

At first it had seemed impossible to find a boat. With the Mela getting under way this was the only season of the year when the boatmen could count on making any money, and those we spoke to were reluctant to take us. There was said to be a rather well-off sadhu who possessed a motor-boat, but it seemed so improbable that we were not surprised when both he and his craft failed to materialise. It was only when we finally decided that we would have to go by train that the Manager of the Mela, an exceptionally calm and efficient man who was also an Assistant Magistrate, managed to find two men who would take us to Mirzapur for ninety rupees. They were Mallahs, a caste whose members by tradition always worked as boatmen when not engaged in crime.

Their boat was the smallest we had so far used. It was also the most elegant. It was a typical Allahabad boat of the sort used for conveying well-hipped pilgrims down the Jumna to the sangam. It had white cushions for the passengers to sit on and a canopy stretched over iron hoops to protect them from the sun. It was eighteen feet long, had a beam of three feet six, and drew about six inches of water unladen. Its hull was built from tin sheeting fastened on to a wooden frame and it was painted light blue and white with a yellow and black band round the gunwales. It stood very high out of the water and with its square stern it was rather like a miniature junk; but a junk built for an Edwardian gentleman. Even the two boatmen, Bag Nath and Hira Lal,

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with their rather droopy moustaches, had a faintly Edwardian air about them, although Bag Nath had to some extent modernised himself with a crew-cut. By the time the trunks and the bedding rolls were stowed aboard there was very little room for the four of us.

We set off from the landing-place by the Fort in the early afternoon and shot down into the Ganges. It was full of rips and whirlpools, bubbling and erupting.

We went down at a terrific rate. This was what we had imagined in our ignorance that travelling on the Ganges would be like all the time, when we had first arrived at Hardwar and seen the water rushing down past the Dharmsala of Der Ismael Khan on its way to the Ganges Canal. Behind us the Fort was already sinking into the distance; to the left was Old Jhusi, with its ramparts half-hidden by its arcadian groves of trees and with its solitary flag flying over the tomb of Sheikh Taqi. The right bank was thirty feet high, and as the level of the river fell day by day, it had left a succession of horizontal scours on the face of it. Along these little paths which were rather like sheep runs men were plodding upstream towing twenty-foot boats up the last couple of miles to Allahabad, bent double with the pieces of bamboo clasped to their chests to which the ropes were attached.

Navigation was difficult; with so much luggage there was only room in the boat for one person to row at a time and the baggage was badly stowed anyway. Having asked to row I found it impossible in this strong current to stop the boat turning round so that at times we found ourselves descending the river stern first. There was nothing wrong with the oars; although they were only made from a couple of bamboo poles with two pieces of packing case for blades, they were beautifully balanced. It would not have mattered if the river had not been so full of fish traps. They were open-ended triangles and quadrilaterals of staked nets, some of them more than two hundred yards long; and with the stream running at some six knots it would be difficult to get out of one of these enclosures if we once got into it. Finally Bag Nath, the man with the crew-cut, became sufficiently apprehensive to put a steering oar over the stern and thenceforward the boat was more or less under control.

According to Bag Nath and Hira Lal these traps were for catching Hilsa, a fish which I had always thought only lived in estuaries, which they said were '*bahut achchha*', very good fish, and for some time they expatiated on how delicious they were. It was little consolation to us who had so far not tasted one single fish while on the Ganges.

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At this late hour of the afternoon, there were no fishermen to be seen, and the site of their operations was deserted; and when finally we did meet some fishermen who were lying on a sandbank and the boatmen asked them for fish, they simply laughed and said, as all the other fishermen we had so far met had said, that all the fish had gone to Calcutta, and made expressive gestures with their hands, indicative of nothingness.

But it was good to be back on the river. The sun shone on it from a cloudless sky and there was a gentle breeze from the north which only fell away towards evening. And the river was as it had always been, except that it was more powerful, and there were many more boats either being tracked up the bank or else running down under sails that were like old bedsheets, with almost more holes than material in them. Some of the boats were going down together in pairs with one square sail set on a yard that was lashed to the masts of both vessels, and below, on deck, the crews shared an equally communal tobacco pipe between them. There were jackals on the bank and corpses in the river, very white, with their legs extended and one of them had a crow walking up and down it, like a captain pacing the bridge, but these macabre details were as nothing compared with the splendour of the yellow river swirling down under the huge sky eight hundred and eighty miles west-north-west of the Bay of Bengal.

Just before sunset we entered one of those reaches in which there was nothing in sight but sand and the banks receded on either side until they were a feint line in the distance.

Here we came down abreast of some country boats belonging to the Ganga and Brahmaputra Water Transport Board. The crews had been building bandals in the river to close the offtakes from the main channel. Bandals are an ingenious and simple arrangement for concentrating the flow of water into the main stream so that it can scour the bottom and keep it deep and open. They are also a very ancient arrangement. A series of parallel lines of bamboos are driven into the bed of the river just above the mouth of a large backwater, each succeeding one a little further downstream at an angle of about thirty degrees to the current. Each bandal is about fifty feet long and the bamboo piles of which they are composed are a foot apart. Each of these uprights is supported by another pole which is driven in at an angle on the downstream side and lashed to the top of it. Bamboo mats are then placed on the upstream side of the obstruction and tied to it so that they hang down into the river to a depth of three feet below the surface. As the flow of current into the backwater is held up by the mats, it creates a slack behind the

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bandals in which the river sheds its silt, eventually forming a shoal, sealing it off completely.

The sun set in a low haze and the sky above it turned a dull orange; but high overhead it still continued to radiate long streamers of purple light eastwards against the dark blue sky in which the evening star shone brilliantly and alone. It was an improbable effect, but it soon faded away and then it was dark.

Above us the bandal builders crouched on the bank and looked down into the boat while the four of us strove by the light of a couple of lanterns to get the food trunk out of the bottom of the boat in which it had firmly embedded itself. It was like trying to get a coffin out of a grave. Even when we finally succeeded in lifting it they still watched on, entranced. It made rum drinking even more difficult than usual. We were looking forward to a good drink and we intended to give one to the boatmen too, as it was New Year's Eve; but it was impossible before such an audience. Later, when their interest was exhausted, we drank rum together and ate a chicken and potatoes laced with chillies; and at nine o'clock we all went to bed, stretched out under the canopy on the makeshift deck, the first time since we had been on the river that we had slept with a roof over our heads.

It was a fine, lonely place. On the bank the bandal builders had erected a small grass hut in which those who were not able to be accommodated in the boats passed the night. In the next boat upstream there was a light in the stern; it illuminated a vague, female-looking figure who was leaning over the side and drawing up water in a brass pot. Seen almost from the level of the river, and against a huge moon which had already risen above it, the sandbank on the opposite side where the bandals were was like a black cliff. Close under it the stream was running fast. It made a rushing, gurgling sound, as it tried to force its way through them; while out in the middle it ran so slowly that the gouts of froth on the surface seemed to be at a standstill.

There seemed little point in trying to stay awake until twelve o'clock in order to see the New Year in. We had had our little celebration. Besides we were in India where it was not even New Year's Eve which according to the reformed Indian Calendar, falls on the 30th Phalguna, our 20th March, and is called Mahavisuva (Year-Ending Day). Even if we wanted to think of our loved ones, Indian Standard Time was five and a half hours ahead of Greenwich Mean Time which would mean thinking about them and engaging in celebrations at half past five in the morning. And far out from shore in the Ganges it seemed

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ever more absurd. On the Ganges one year, a century or even a thousand years was much as another; the only difference was in the seasons—and here on the sands in the middle of it they were only indicated by the level of the water and the power of the sun and the rain.

At five o'clock awful spitting noises from the bank announced the beginning of another day, and Bag Nath and Hira Lal changed their sleeping position from one lying alongside one another head to toe to a more intimate arrangement in which they were head to head and back to back, a difficult operation which they accomplished with awful groanings and thrashing of limbs. We were both wide awake now and it seemed that the dawn would never come. When it did, we staggered up the bank with our soap-boxes and towels and found that it had been worth waiting for. The moon was still up in the west and the freezing wind which poured over the sands gave them a clear, clean look, as if the world had been suddenly reborn. Big skeins of geese were going overhead. These feelings of rebirth were not shared by the bandal builders who sat huddled together in the mouth of their grass hut with their teeth chattering. The river was like ice, so cold that it seemed impossible that one could ever heat it sufficiently to make tea, and when the water finally did boil and we were just about to put the tea in the pot, the boatmen suddenly pushed off without any warning and we were on our way.

At eight we passed Sirsa away on the right bank, but all we saw of it were a few temples, and we never saw the place where another river, the Tons, entered the Ganges at all. The Ganges now embarked on a series of vast bends first to the north and then to the south; augmented by the Tons it was bigger than ever, in some places more than five hundred yards wide. Turtles shaped like carving dishes surfaced close to the boat and big fish rose which the boatmen called Sur. Apart from an occasional ferry we saw scarcely any boats at all. In some places the banks were low and green with fields of rice and barley sloping gently up from the shore. Instead of being built of mud as they had been previously, the village houses were mostly of brick. The farms were substantial two-storied places with tiled roofs like farms in the Lombard plain, but here they were surrounded by acacia, nim and pipal trees and interspersed by dense, tall grass and plantations of bamboos which sometimes sprouted up through the tops of the trees like flag-poles. In other places the banks rose above the river in steep cliffs that were so corroded by the weather, that it was difficult to know whether they were earth or stone. At a place called Lachagir the cliffs were full of caves which the boatmen said were inhabited by sadhus; and close to them on the shore, there was a brick well-shaft from which the surrounding earth

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had been washed away so that it stood alone like a tower. Above it, on top of the cliff, there was a ruined fort. Once this had been a port of call for steamers of the India General Steam Navigation Company. 'Here,' wrote the author of the *District Gazeteer,* mysteriously, 'according to tradition stood the lac palace of Dur-Yodhana,* in which the Pandava brethren, had the plot succeeded, were to be burned to death.'

All through the day we took an hour each in turn at the oars, and as it grew hotter the sweat poured off us while Wanda fed us sweets and fruit and bidis as the spirit moved her.

At one o'clock we were at the bottom of the first big bends of the river and here we anchored in shoal water in the middle and did what we had longed to do, jumped into it. While the boatmen performed their pujas, sprinkling the boat and themselves with water, we washed ourselves in privacy, hidden under the stern. Afterwards in the time it took us to eat a tin of sardines, some bread and marmalade and a couple of papayas they cooked themselves some chapatis and then we were off again. These men were more like fugitives than boatmen.

Immediately afterwards we saw two crocodiles lying out on a sandbank. One was very large, disguised as a gnarled old tree trunk; the other was smaller with a snout as finely pointed as an expensive American fountain pen. The big one disappeared immediately, the other waited until we were abreast of it before it slid into the water.

'I wouldn't have bathed if I had known there were coccodriles,'† Wanda said.

A whole school of dolphins escorted us into the next reach to the north. On the left, on the long peninsula formed by the big bend made by the river, fields of rice, wheat and mustard extended to the water's edge. There were huge mango trees and tall, plumed grass in which the wind sighed with the sound of a distant sea. The women walking on the shore, having washed and dried their saris, let them flutter behind them in the strong wind that was blowing

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* Dur-Yodhana was one of the sons of the Princess of Gandhara and a leader in the war of the Maha-Bharata. After a pregnancy of two years she gave birth to a piece of flesh which, when it was divided into a hundred and one portions and placed in a hundred and one jars, produced a hundred sons and one daughter. The Pandavas were their cousins, of whom Dur-Yodhana was violently jealous, particularly of Bhima, who eventually smashed Dur-Yodhana's thigh with a club and then kicked him on the head, putting him out of action.

† From the Italian *coccodrillo.*

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from the north. But it was only here where the river watered the fields that this country, the northwestern part of the district of Mirzapur, had such an air of fertility. Inland, north of the Grand Trunk Road from Allahabad to Banaras, there were waterless saline wastes in which nothing could grow and which looked, according to the *Gazetteer*, as if they were covered with hoar-frost. This country was called Bhadohi and once it had been part of the domain of a mysterious and civilised race called Bhars which had been finally submerged in the Aryan invasion of the Ganges Valley. The remains of their water tanks, always aligned in a different direction from that which was customary among the Hindus, and some dilapidated forts are to be seen in this region still.

To the right, on the outward bend of the river, there were steep cliffs which glowed as if they were red hot in the afternoon sun. All this reach of the river was full of birds which, apart from the morning and evening flights of geese and duck, had been strangely absent since we left Allahabad. Flocks of lapwings scurried along the shore leaving their footprints in the mud and calling apprehensively to one another; dark brown crag martins dipped about the cliffs and in the shallows spoonbills were raking the bottom with their long black and yellow bills. There were other kinds too, but it required more knowledge than either of us possessed to identify them. The boatmen were not much help. Every time I asked them about some particular species all they said was '*chota chiriya*' which meant 'little bird', at the same time flapping their arms and making chee-cheeing noises.

We were now in the district of Mirzapur and the boatmen said that we would arrive at the city the following afternoon. Gradually we crawled up to the top of the last long bend towards the north. It was a hard slog in the teeth of the wind and I was glad that I had learned to scull and knew how to 'feather', an accomplishment which the boatmen regarded with a certain amount of awe. By the time we succeeded in turning it the sun was setting. Here, on the edge of a mudbank, a bandal boat was moored and Hira Lal, who was at the helm, steered us in towards it. Obviously he intended to spend the night there.

Apart from the proximity of the bandal boat, it was a horrible place, especially for us. It lacked every amenity: a bank on which to stand while washing; cover for even the simplest needs and, what was worse, it was necessary to plough through a couple of hundred yards of mud in order to reach any kind of shore. I said that we would continue. I was reluctant to go against the boatmen, for I knew that they liked to camp with people they knew and trusted, but this was too much. Nevertheless I knew that it was a mistake to go against

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the custom of the country, but this was something that I and my countrymen had never learned, and, it seemed, never would. They were very displeased.

Soon it was quite dark and we had to feel our way down through the shoals using an oar as a sounding pole. Now when I suggested that they should stop, both boatmen ignored me and Hira Lal who was at the oars redoubled his efforts.

'You shouldn't have told them to go on,' Wanda said. I could have murdered her.

They went on and on for more than an hour. There was thick mist over the river now and it was as cold as hell. Every few minutes we went aground. Finally I had to beg them to stop and when they did it was at a place which was also separated from the shore by an expanse of stinking mud. It was exactly the same sort of place that they had wanted to camp at originally, only this time there was a village on the bank above the beach, and like all the other boatmen they detested villages.

'This is a bad place,' they said, reproachfully.

We made camp and cooked our various foods by the light of the kerosene lanterns without speaking to one another. The village on the bank above us was as silent and dark as the tomb; not even a dog barked in it. Finally, under the influence of hot rum and lime the boatmen thawed; but all they would say was that this was a bad place. It was impossible not to agree with them.

On the other side of the river a wedding was being celebrated and the sound of trumpets and drums floated across to us clearly. A month previously we would have asked the boatmen to take us across to it, but we had had enough for one day. While we were washing up, five men came down the bank from the village and lit an enormous brushwood fire. They carried on a conversation for five minutes and then disappeared as abruptly as they had come without looking in our direction at all. What on earth were they up to? Was this their way of having an evening out?

The previous night we had slept with the side curtains brailed up. Here, because none of us wanted to be in full view of the village and because it was draughty, we lowered them. It was a mistake. Soon the atmosphere was like a Turkish bath, with the smells of dung, chillies, paraffin and dirty blankets thrown in for good measure. Worst of all, both of us found ourselves under the necessity of going ashore, not once but several times during the night. Inside, under the canopy, the boat was not only smelly but black as pitch and these repeated journeys were nightmare ones. First we stepped on the supine bodies of the boatmen who seemed impervious to these needs but who, each time we trod on them started up with the intention of defending themselves. Then we

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lowered ourselves down into the cold clammy mud which reached half-way to our knees.

It was no use wearing shoes because when we returned to the boat they would have been so muddy that there would have been nowhere to put them; and it was equally difficult with bare feet as the boat had so much freeboard that it was impossible to hang over the side to wash them without falling in, unless one was a giant. The only solution was to bring back a kettle of water, stick one's feet under the canopy and pour it over them. It was a ridiculous arrangement for, as Wanda said when she returned after one of these sorties with her teeth chattering and with long grey stockings of mud on her legs which one kettleful of water was insufficient to remove, 'If it wasn't for the boatmen we could do it from the boat—and they are fast asleep.'

The boatmen were so anxious to leave that when we woke the next morning we found ourselves in midstream and already under way. It was only a quarter to six and the sky over the village was just beginning to grow red. There seemed little point in getting up, so we lit the stove and stayed in our bedding rolls.

There was no wind and the water was like oil. Over it terns and swallows were flying low and from the mudflats clouds of ringed plovers rose and wheeled uttering melancholy whistling sounds, alarmed by the boatmen who were chanting their pujas. The sun rose at a quarter to seven and with it went the mysterious beauty of the early morning. We stopped on a sandbank to wash. The sand was covered with delicate white shells which were like tiny translucent fingernails and little conical ones with horizontal rings round them.

There were villages on the left bank now. At a place called Ferojpur, where there was a landing place with a big flight of stone steps, women with baskets on their heads were carrying sand up from three high-sterned country boats. There were others down at the water's edge washing pots in the river whose clothes were so discoloured that they were almost indistinguishable from the bank behind them. Here we passed a sixty-foot ceremonial boat which was being towed up to Allahabad, for the Mela. It had a long, pointed bow, the same shape as the snout of the smaller of the two crocodiles we had seen the previous day, and a divided stern rather like a catamaran's. On each side, facing backwards, a figurehead in reverse, was the carved and painted figure of a prancing horse. Four men were tracking this monstrous thing up the river and the towing mast which was supported by a multiplicity of stays and guys was bent like a bow.

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'It will take them seven days to accomplish the journey,' Bag Nath said, 'as it will us when we come to return,' Hira Lal added, meaningfully. 'It is a long hard way.'

Now to the north and south, the bank receded again and the river became immensely wide. To the north there was sand as far as one could see from the level of the boat; to the south was an outcrop of the Vindhyan hills, a rather barren-looking sandstone escarpment on which grew a few solitary bushy-topped trees. We were about eight miles to the east of Mirzapur.

The river took us down to a place on the right bank where there was a village on a cliff and a small island off-shore piled high with slabs of stone on the top of which there were a couple of columns about seven feet long, one still standing, the other on its side.

'This is Bindhachal, and here is the Mandir of Vindhya-Vasini Devi, Mahayama Durga, and we are going to do a puja,' Bag Nath said, as he steered the boat in past the island towards the shore where there was an impressive looking ghat. He was not asking us. It was a statement.

The ghat looked as if it had been subjected to an artillery bombardment. Massive masonry buttresses had been overthrown by the flood waters and lay in the river. The water, which must have risen to an extraordinary height, had swept over the top of the embankment which was equally solidly constructed, tearing stones from their foundations and hurling them about in disorder. Nevertheless it was a cheerful place. Hordes of small children were swimming in the river, elderly holy men dozed in the sun, and half a dozen barbers at the water's edge were shaving the heads of those who were about to set off for the temple of Mahayama Durga.

While the boatmen were away we ate a tin of sardines which had something wrong with it. The sardines were not actually rotten but they had a very curious taste. By the time we had discussed them and savoured them rather like a couple of amateurs discussing a bottle of claret (but how infinitely less disgusting it is to discuss a wine that has gone off than a sardine) and because we were hungry, we had eaten the lot. I was sufficiently apprehensive about these sardines to record the fact that we had eaten them in a notebook, so that if we did get ptomaine poisoning there would be some information for a doctor to go on if we were already unconscious; and when the boatmen returned from their puja, which they did in a surprisingly short time, with shaven top-knots, glowing red tilak marks on their foreheads, smelling of sweet oil and with garlands of marigolds round their necks, and suggested that we, too, might like to visit the Goddess of Destruction, it seemed appropriate to do so.

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The temple was in the centre of the village, and was approached by a narrow lane. The shops surrounding it displayed heaps of brilliant coloured powders for making the tilak mark and others for reddening the soles of the feet, ingenuous clay statues and cheap cotton scarves. The way into it was through an open-sided court slightly raised above the road and approached by steps. It was filled with pandas; drums and bells sounded.

Vindhya-Vasini-Devi was undoubtedly very old. The way to her shrine was through a low entrance. She was enclosed in a brass or gilded cage, and the walls were of silver carved in low relief. There was a feeling of terrible constriction in this narrow cell. She had a tiny shrunken black head with the staring eyes of a madwoman, the whites of which were made from silver plates. Her beak-like nose had a jewelled ring inserted in one nostril; white flowers hung down like hair from her head and without them she would have been bald. Her little black foot rested on a black rat and round her neck there were swags of marigolds. She was a horrid-looking little thing. We stood barefooted in a slush compounded of Ganges water, mud, squashed flowers and gouts of red liquid which might have been blood but probably wasn't. But not for long. There were crowds of prospective worshippers behind us and we were only there on sufferance; soon the pressure became intolerable and we popped out into the covered court like a couple of corks.

Vindhya-Vasini-Devi had another name. She was also known as Bhagwan Bhowani, the Black Mother; and it was to her, until Sleeman‡ destroyed them, that the Thugs used to come from all over India, usually in the Autumn after the rains, to offer her a share of what they had taken from their victims after strangling them with the ruhmal, the square knotted cloth. And when they themselves were finally hunted down they died on the gallows with the triumphant cry on their lips '*Jai Vindhyachal*' after adjusting the nooses round their own necks which they did with practised hands.

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‡ Sir William Sleeman (1788–1856), Indian official and major-general. Superintended suppression of Thuggi and dacoity, 1835–41. Author *of Rambles and Recollections of an Indian Official, A Vocabulary of Thug Language* and other works.

A map made by Sleeman in 1838 of part of the Kingdom of Oudh with the 'assistance' of twenty eminent Thugs who between them had murdered five thousand persons—one of them called Buhran had strangled 931—shows 274 Bele, the murder and burial places used by the Thugs. In each one of them there were hundreds of murdered persons as exhumation proved. They were as equally and closely spaced along the roads as if they had been bus stops. It has been conservatively estimated that, until Sleeman began their suppression, the Thugs were disposing of thirty thousand travellers a year.

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Having come so far it seemed a pity to go back and we pressed on at the head of a considerable procession until we reached the main road: to the left just beyond the village there was a river bed crossed by a castellated and loopholed bridge, in the middle of which stood a mad-looking sadhu ringing a bell; to the right there was a temple by the side of the road in which the body of the god was hidden behind a red cloth; its face was a huge amorphous thing of clay and there was only the faintest indication of a mouth. Although it was impressive it was nothing compared with that of Vindhya-Vasini and after seeing it we went back to the ghat where we found the boatmen fast asleep. They looked as if they were dead, an illusion that was enhanced by the garlands of marigolds which they wore, and we woke them with difficulty. Their efforts of the last couple of days and the emotional excitement of the puja had knocked the stuffing out of them. Drooping over the oars, half asleep, they paddled the boat down the last few miles to Mirzapur.

Here, on the western outskirts of the city, the river bank was more substantial than the constructions which stood on it. The ancient houses of the merchants, who until the middle of the last century had conducted their business with conspicuous success, now hung precariously over the river in an extremity of decay. In one place what must have been a noble flight of stone steps had led down to the water but under the assault of the river, it had collapsed and now it was nothing more than a great heap of cut stones on which laundrymen were beating their client's clothes to pieces.

In half an hour we reached the bridge of boats on which a one-way system operated, controlled by bells. It was packed with bullock-carts which came thundering down on to it through a steep and narrow cutting in an endless stream on their way back to the country districts north of the river. Upstream of it half a dozen vessels were unloading bricks which emaciated-looking men were carrying away up the bank on their heads, and we nosed our own boat in amongst them until it grounded. The journey was over and we had nowhere to go. 'Sahib,' Hira Lal said. 'We will take you further down the river to Kashi (Banaras). We can do this and still return in time for the Mela.'

It was a temptation. We knew no one at Mirzapur. Admittedly someone in the High Commissioner's Office in New Delhi had given us the name of the Manager of a carpet factory at Mirzapur who, he said, had a bungalow in which customers sometimes stayed, but we had no idea how to get in touch with him, nor were we confident that he would be pleased if we suddenly appeared unannounced and asked if we could use his firm's bungalow. But, having finally got to Mirzapur, it seemed silly to pass it by.

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With little hope of finding one and feeling slightly ridiculous, I set off up the bank in search of a telephone. A little way inland I came to some old buildings picturesquely situated in a grove of trees. This place had once been an indigo factory and some of the vats in which the preparation had been made were still there. Now it was the office of a carpet manufactory and the manager, a kindly, middle-aged Indian, at once sent some of his men to help with the luggage.

While they toiled up the bank with it I sat in the boat writing letters of recommendation for the boatmen. Then I paid them the ninety rupees which had been agreed upon plus an extra ten rupees as a present. We were sorry to leave them and they, who so far had shown no emotion of any kind, did so now. The last we saw of them was rigging a bamboo mast to tow the boat upstream.

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A Long Time on the Ganga

Raghubir Singh

I first saw the Ganga—the Ganges to non-Indians—from the top of the Gola, the granary at Patna, in 1965. Surrounded by a group of villagers, I watched India's most revered river sweep by in a great brown bend past the capital of Bihar state. The Ganga moved me deeply. I had wanted to travel along its 1,550-mile-length since my childhood, when my mother read to me from the *Ramayana,* the epic that speaks so eloquently of the Ganga. My mother also explained the significance of the Ganga as a goddess. She did this not in a didactic way, but casually: while cooking, at meals, or during the many religious ceremonies she performed. For years she herself had intended to make the pilgrimage to the source, but something or other had always prevented her. Finally she fulfilled her lifelong desire. When she returned, after a six-week trek, she was radiant with joy. I still remember her moving descriptions of her beloved Ganga. I remember her account of her first plunge into the river's cold and purifying waters, which left her body numb and her mind transported. Even today, thirty-five years later, a smile lights up her face when she recalls her pilgrimage.

The images evoked by her descriptions of the river were etched in my mind very early on. In time I relived some of her experiences. By 1966 photographing the Ganga had become my passion, a passion which, though it abated in 1974 when I published my first book on the Ganga, revived in 1977 when I returned to the river. I went back again and again until 1990. During this time, I have also answered the captivating call of Lake Manasarowar and Mount Kailas, the *axis mundi* of the Hindu world, from where the mythical Ganga flows as a celestial stream. Five times I have answered the call of the actual source in the Himalayas. I have been entranced by the Ganga breaking into the plains at Hardwar. I have been drawn to the villages of the Gangetic plain: Singhirampur near Fatehgarh town and Tajpur and Chandravati near

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Banaras. Sometimes, outside a village, a lonely peepul tree shading a few lingams, its roots reaching out to the river, cast its spell on me.

But the crowded cities such as Banaras and Calcutta—and, to a lesser extent, Kanpur and Patna—have also had a strong attraction for me, so much so that I have produced one book on Banaras and two on Calcutta. In Banaras I came to understand the ancient and medieval urbanity of India, sensing in its very air a past peopled with poets and philosophers. In Calcutta, by contrast, I experienced the cosmopolitan nature of a population alive to western philosophy, art and literature without severing ties with the complex culture of the Ganga.

India's own art and history were to be found at countless places on the Ganga. I sensed them particularly at Chunar, from whose sandstone some of the greatest sculptures of the subcontinent have been carved: the Didargunj Yakshi, the Sarnath Teaching Buddha, the Ashokan Lion Capital and others. Chunar awakened in me a sense of history. From the top of the fort, I watched the river make a vast bend. At the foot of the fort lay a part of the Gangetic plain. Standing there, I imagined some of the figures of history who had looked out over the same view: Vikramaditya from ancient India, Sher Shah Suri and Humayun from medieval India, and Warren Hastings from British India.

I witnessed history of a different sort at the *melas*, the festivals. These busy, bustling gatherings drew me into a past which links to the present through the pageantry and practices of India. I went to *mela* after *mela*—at Sonepur, at Hardwar and Allahabad, at Sagar Island and elsewhere. At Sagar Island—in India, but near the Bangladesh border—Hindus believe the Ganga flows into the nether world, the sea, which is inhabited by the *nagas*, the semi-divine water spirits. In Bangladesh, another arm of the Ganga—the Padma—is joined by the majestic Meghna and the broad Brahmaputra. There the Ganga reached out and enfolded me in its enormous liquid arms, just as my mother had drawn me into her arms and painted for me a word-picture of the Ganga flowing through the celestial world, the terrestrial world and the nether world.

* * *

The decline of the Himalayan-Ganga

The inspiring pilgrim route to Gangotri had changed dramatically when I revisited it in 1989. The route, a childhood dream fulfilled in adulthood, was no longer a narrow mountain trail. This time I drove all the way to the

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Gangotri temple. A new and flashy kind of pilgrim had appeared: the upper middle class and the rich who came in speedy Japanese-designed Maruti cars and vans. There were crowds of noisy pilgrims of all descriptions. Many carried transistor radios and cassette recorders, turned to full volume, playing the brassy and syrupy music of the Bombay films, breaking the spiritual solitude of the valley. The silent, old-style pilgrim was outnumbered. Only a select few walked. Most came by bus. The road had brought the entire Gangetic plain dangerously close to Gangotri; Delhi itself was only twelve hours away by car. The bazaars of India were now well connected to Gangotri. There were more shops, more trekkers, more mountaineers, more pilgrims and more sadhus. To supervise the rush of people the state government had built a police station right above a splendid and sculpturesque waterfall—an act comparable to erecting a Public Works Department building in cement beside the Taj Mahal. The state government proposed to turn Gangotri into a 'tourist resort', though where it would find the space in the narrow Ganga valley, no one knew. On hearing the state government's plans, an old sadhu remarked: 'We will not permit this place of penance to be crowded with honeymoon huts.'

The government had failed to heed the warning of scientists and ecologists: the Himalayan glaciers, which took 5,000 to 15,000 years to form, could disappear within 350 years. A few centuries from now, what will happen to the source of the Ganga? Will the bureaucrats and the bazaars of the plains finish off the glacier? Will the Ganga become one day like the Saraswati, the lost river of India, alive today only in our belief and in ancient literature?

The greatest damage of all was downstream, at Tehri, a small, nondescript town founded in 1818. There a huge dam will be erected, 850 feet high. A drawing of the reservoir showed it shaped like a garupa swallowing the Bhagirathi and letting it out as a long and meandering tail. But though there was a good deal of charm in the project-drawing, there was none at the actual site. I arrived there with the sound of blasting in my ears. Clouds of dust arose, as rock and debris cascaded into a defile. The work on a power tunnel was in full swing. The dam will be completed, possibly by 1996, providing power, water for irrigation, and drinking water as far as Delhi.

On the Himalayan Ganga and on the Narmada of central India, India's vocal environmentalists have lost their fight to stop the large dams, though it has been established that small dams are overall more beneficial. So the thousands of evacuees from the Tehri site will join the many millions who are the victims of the last forty years of evacuation from five hundred dam sites. Environmentalists warn of the buildup of seismicity since the last earthquake,

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in 1828. In the event of another earthquake, at least twenty-three villages will be drowned and seventy-six villages flooded. Much of the town of Hardwar will be swept away. The loss of life will be in the thousands.

The fight to stop the dam was lost because of the juggernaut-combination of the plain's politicians and contractors. The benighted Gangetic plain has made its deep inroad into the Bhagirathi valley. But there is some hope at Gangotri itself, because vested interests have little to gain financially. The Himalayan Adventure Trust and the Indian Mountaineering Foundation have joined hands to 'save Gangotri'. They want to turn the valley into a protected national park. It will be difficult to effect this around a pilgrim route.

But the environmentalists' most difficult task lies in the Gangetic plain, where the sacred Ganga snakes past village after village, town after town, and city after city. In the plain live about one-third of India's 830 million people.

An encounter with 'faith'

The Ganga flows into the Gangetic plain at Hardwar, which lies at the foot of the Siwalik hills, the last outriders of the Himalayas. To me the town of Hardwar is memorable not because it is one of the seven sacred cities of Hindu India, nor because the Kumbha *mela* is periodically celebrated there. It is memorable because of my moving encounter with a Bihari farmer. Short, stocky, unshaven and dark skinned, he wore a saffron vest and a white dhoti, and when I met him he was engaged in conversation with the *pandas*. These are the ritual-specialists and record-keeping priests, many of whom specialize in fleecing pilgrims. They had just deprived the farmer of most of his money, even though they knew he was about to begin an epic journey. Some time before, the Bihari farmer had vowed that if he became the father of a son he would make a very special pilgrimage. He would carry pots of Ganga water in baskets suspended from a yoke, not by walking, as is usual, but by prostrating his way across Uttar Pradesh and the Bihar states to the Siva temple at Deoghar, near the border of Bengal. During his journey he would be entirely dependent on the goodwill of well-wishers and good Samaritans.

The son was born. He had come to fulfill his vow. A pilgrim to Hardwar had given him Rs 40 (£5 in 1967) to begin his journey. He still had this money, wrapped up in a kerchief, when I saw him begin his odyssey. He took one step forward, placed the yoke about six feet in front of him, stepped back, then prostrated, his hands reaching out in a sign of supplication before the pots of

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Ganga water. He would perform this act again and again, for an estimated five months, until he reached Deoghar.

I have often wondered what happened to him. Did he complete his journey? Did his son receive an education? In my mind the farmer stands as a symbol of all the worship along the Ganga, including that at the great bathing festivals. It is such fervent belief which makes the Ganga a great and sacred waterway.

The farmer had filled his pots of water near Har-ki-pairi, where a footprint impressed in stone is believed to be that of Vishnu. These sacred steps, at Hardwar—the Gate of Hari or Vishnu—are strictly speaking not on the Ganga. The town lies on a canal, just below the point from where it takes off from the Ganga. In 1854 Captain Proby Cautley (later Sir Proby) of the Bengal Engineers built what was then the largest irrigation system in the world. It was a daring project for its time. It cost £2.2 million including the extensions which continued till 1870, and ran for 350 miles, irrigating 1,200,000 acres of the land between the Ganga and the Jamuna, the Doab. The canal ended the major problem of the Doab: famine.

The Ganga sculptures

The painting and photography of the Ganga make up a sizeable body of work. But no visual art about the Ganga matches the charge and bite of classical sculpture. The Ganga and Kailas sculptures were carved between the 5th and the 12th century AD. It was the Muslim conquests which led in the end to their decline.

Somewhat like my journeys to the Ganga itself, I made many journeys to look firsthand at the river's waters chiselled in stone. Near Madras I stood before the descent of the Ganga at Mahabhallipuram. It is carved in a natural fault in a monolithic rock. At the base a cat mimics the worshippers. Elephants arrive at the water. Siva, Indra and Brahma watch Bhagirath in penance. *Nagas*, in prayer, stand in the river. Once, on top of the rock, a cistern full of water provided a symbolic, celestial flow through the fault. This living and monumental sculpture from the 5th century faces the rising sun and the lapping waves of the Bay of Bengal. At dawn the sculpted rock begins to glow. Its colours continue to change with the movement of the sun, until at night it seems like a frieze for the netherworld.

Also in Tamilnadu, at Gangaikondacholapuram, the story of how Bhagirath caused the Ganga to descend to earth was sculpted in the 11th century for the Chola king Rajendra. Siva broke the fearsome fall of Ganga,

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on Mount Kailas, by catching her waters in his matted locks. From these she flowed in seven sacred streams, one of them being the river Ganga.

The Chola king worshipped the river so much that vessels of Ganga water were brought all the way to southern India to be offered as a tribute to him by defeated rulers. They filled a large water tank, which was known as the 'liquid pillar of victory'.

While in south India the Ganga is often majestically sculpted, in Calcutta's Indian Museum I saw a more modest representation. Riding her mythical *makara*—the crocodile-like creature—Ganga folds her hands in obeisance to Siva. She is a dutiful bride. Back in the south, Siva's consort Parvati is comforted by him at the prospect of becoming a co-consort.

In Bangladesh, at the Rajshahi Museum, Ganga is not shown with Siva. She is alone and gorgeous. In one of the most remarkable works of Hindu art, an unknown 12th-century sculptor has carved a curvacious and bejewelled Ganga. Though her nose is chipped and her arms broken, the Sena Ganga resonates with the force and finesse of an art that had reached its peak. The Ganga in this sculpture is truly a goddess.

I went westwards, to Udaygiri in central India. There the Jamuna is shown joining the Ganga. I went further west to Elephanta, the island off Bombay. There, in the caves, I saw the Ganga flowing in three realms: the celestial world, the terrestrial world and the nether world.

Still in western India, at Ellora near the city of Aurangabad, Mount Kailas is reborn in the greatest temple art of India, just as it is reborn in the stupa at Borobudur and Angkor Wat. The 8th-century Kailas temple at Ellora was once painted white to be a mirror image of the cosmic mountain. The sculptors must have possessed the same kind of passion as the Bihari farmer, for they have carved straight down one mountainside for one hundred feet. The monolithic sculpture—rather than temple—and its vast pit, the caves on three sides with all their carvings, the giant elephant sculptures and the tall pillars are all hewn from one portion of the hill. In one frieze the three sister streams are depicted: Ganga, Jamuna and Saraswati.

At the base of the main Kailas temple, Ravana, the demon protagonist of the *Ramayana,* is sculpted as a sinewy figure attempting to lift the cosmic mountain. Siva is there too, keeping him down with his big toe. A wall separates the sculpture from the symbolic axis of the temple. Here, too, pilgrims do the circumambulation of the man-made Mount Meru.

Although the entire body of Ganga sculpture is weathered and eroded and has often suffered centuries of neglect and denudation, these sublime works

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reach deep into our senses and stir us more than any of India's other visual arts. They create a whole world, as if the very waters of the Ganga and the stones of Kailas have been transformed magically into sculpture. They carry us through the panorama of the early centuries of India's 'quest of the mind'. We read that mind through their sculpted stories.

Ancient India gave countless names to the Ganga, among them *Loknadi*, the River of the World. It was the world of the Ganga that Alexander the Great set his heart on conquering, but never reached. It is the river which every Hindu would like to reach. And I, who have reached it again and again, will always go back to it, because it has led me through the whole panorama of India's life and culture, from the age of the Aryans to the age of the atomic power plant. Yet, when I return to it, one day in the future, will it be the *Mahabharata's* river of blood or the peaceful river of every caste and creed?

The Uttar Pradesh plain

Tajpur, near Banaras, is sited on a high bluff overlooking the Gangetic plain. When I first visited it, in 1970, with a Banaras boatman, its problems did not preoccupy me. I was beguiled by the sight of the earthen oil lamps lining the riverfront and by the spiderweb spread of a fishing net against the setting sun. We did not linger on the riverbank. The boatman took me inside.

We entered the hut of his brother-in-law, who was on his knees facing a niche, in which there was a small and colourful clay image of the goddess Laxmi. Two earthen oil lamps lit up the niche and the bare hut. The Banaras boatman joined the prayers while I watched from a corner. They worshipped in complete and mesmerizing silence. Suddenly the silence was broken by a flat, *thuk*-like sound, as both boatmen's foreheads hit the cowdung floor in unison, as if a powerful force were orchestrating their movements. Their hands and palms were spread out. They were embracing the very earth, the earth of Laxmi. Yet the Goddess of Wealth would remain an illusive figure for Tajpur.

I never forgot Tajpur—its riverfront, its mud huts rising out of the winter mists, its women coming down for water. I returned to it in 1989 when the *Mahabharata* was being televised.

Twenty-seven-year-old Ram Avatar Choudhary could not contain his excitement: 'Today Kichak will be killed,' he said, 'I mustn't miss this episode.' We walked through tile-roofed Tajpur set among peepuls and neem trees and

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clumps of cane, to Chandravati, a stone's throw away. There is no electricity in Tajpur, therefore it has no television. Recently, when the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* were serialized, much of Tajpur went to Chandravati to follow the ancient web of moral tales.

The subject of electrification is very important to Tajpur. All the surrounding villages are electrified. Frail and greying Kashi Nath Tiwari, on his way to plant potatoes, tells me, 'The J.E. [Junior Engineer] was given Rs 2,600 (£80) for electrification.' 'Do you have a receipt?' I ask, 'No,' he replies. He adds: 'We cannot complain to the M.L.A. [Member of the Legislative Assembly] because he rarely visits us and he does not care.' Yet the electricity lines are only two hundred yards away from Tajpur on the Banaras-Ghazipur road. There, at a tea shop, I met the J.E., who claimed the payment was partial and more had to be paid.

Tajpur has been cheated out of electricity because the five hundred people of the village are in a minority in the constituency. Caste is also an important factor. Tajpur has ten Brahmin and thirty fishermen-boatmen families; in the other villages of the constituency, the Yadavs, the Khatiks and the Pasis are in the majority. Even if Tajpur voted along with the majority its fate would not change, because the M.L.A. would find Tajpur irrelevant to his victory and his needs.

Electrification would bring major changes to Tajpur. Its three wells, today always crowded, could be dispensed with, and water could be pumped up to a storage tank and supplied to each household. Electricity would also mean that more thread could be woven on the *charka*, the Gandhian spinning wheel, by the housewives.

Yet, even without electricity, change has come to Tajpur. In 1972 a lift-canal was completed, connecting to the Ganga. Tajpur happened to be the only place where the river never dried up, so it was there that the lift-pump was installed, pumping water to twenty-four other villages. Previously, hardy crops of maize, millet, jo, jowar and rahar dal (a type of lentil) were grown and watered by the monsoon. Now wheat is the chief crop, as well as rice and potatoes.

In 1970 the main occupation of Tajpur was fishing. Today, pollution has greatly reduced the number of fish in the Ganga. Also, the fine nylon net, introduced in the last ten years, brings in only finger fish and spawn. The traditional cotton net was coarse and caught only big fish: rohu, tangra, gaunch, bam(eel) and gagra. In 1970, half of Tajpur lived on fishing; today there are only four fishermen. In time, they too will abandon the profession.

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A few ex-fishermen have opened betel leaf and tea shops. But three former fishermen paid Rs 10,000 (£300) each to an agent to fly them to the Middle East. From there, working as labourers, each remits about Rs 2,500 (£75) every month to his family. They have been doing this since 1985. I met one of them while he was on a visit home. He was wearing a new pink shirt and carried a transistor radio, He had sent home enough money for his tiled-roofed and mud-walled house to be replaced by a brick building. Another man has left Tajpur permanently to become a rich contractor in Mathra.

Twenty-five former fishermen, now in construction, are dispersed from Bombay to Calcutta. Each sends about Rs 225 (£7) to his family. Every day fifteen men bicycle to Banaras from Tajpur to work in construction. Construction work is also better paid than weaving, so eleven local weavers gave up their looms in favour of building and housing work.

Two persons work a loom. In a year they weave ten to twelve silk saris, which they sell, for Rs 400 (£12) each, to the Banaras merchants, who price a sari at about Rs 4000 (£120).

Chandravati, in contrast, is a prosperous village. In 1970 its two temples were made of bricks and mortar and its houses from mud and tile. Today, 75 percent of the houses are of bricks and mortar. In the village there is 1 colour television set and 29 black and white sets, 2 scooters, 1 motorbike, 2 tractors and 2 taxis. Chandravati was electrified in 1985.

The reasons for the village's electrification and its relative prosperity are obvious. Chandravati boasts two Jain temples which draw many rich pilgrims from all over India. The Jains are a wealthy community. This influential village will now urge the government to take the necessary measures to check the erosion of the Ganga that threatens one temple, overlooking the river. They are also pushing for the riverfront of both villages to be electrified because thousands camp there during two festivals. Will this be a stroke of luck for Tajpur? Or will the J.E. still vacillate?

Soon after visiting Tajpur, in 1989, I went to Allahabad to the Kumbha *mela* festival. Thousands of poles carried electricity lines into the temporary township, reminding me of the J.E.'s words. They sounded surreal: 'For every nine poles, three are free, the rest have to be paid for.'

In the gloom of his hut, Surya Narain, a Tajpur weaver, says wistfully, 'Electricity would make a difference to our lives.'

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Gangotri

Vijay Singh

Several weeks away from that wet autumnal memory, I was deep in the bosom of the Himalayas. The Bhagirathi, the real ancestor of Ganga, at Lanka, a little village below Gangotri, looked flirtatious, playful, coquettish. Below me the turquoise pool of water resembled an enormous crystal, rugged and yet smooth, which in some bygone era might have been rolled down the mountains from the coffers of a mythical king. Fifty metres beyond, the Bhagirathi made its turbulent course through a finely made sculptured gorge, slipping imperceptibly into the pool. To the left was the Jharhganga, one of the many Gangas in the region. Bouncing and cart-wheeling noisily over the rocks, her waters flowed feverishly into the mother, Bhagirathi, knowing well that it was here at Lanka that they confided their final identity to the universal might of Bhagirathi.

Some hundred metres above the river, two black poles stood on opposite banks, announcing the most memorable fact of Ganga's autobiography. It was by means of these poles and the long jute ropes suspended from their tops that the old pilgrim could swing himself across the river and take the hazardous path which led towards the mysterious birth of the sacred river. The rope bridge was a simple monument, neglected and ignored, in memory of those who, with cloth-bundles on their backs and bamboo-umbrellas in their hands, had slipped from the ropes to find salvation in the roaring waters of the Bhagirathi. The rope bridge signalled that the Gangotri yatra to the source of the holy river was indeed a rare penance undertaken only by those who bad abandoned their mundane urge to exist on this planet of hypocrisy, intrigue and deceit. Little wonder then, that in an era which still could not build bridges over rivers of material need, the large mass of pilgrims admitted defeat before the frightening gaze of Gangetic ropeways, and retraced their steps towards the plains. The deathless gambled their lives for a mad faith, and

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those still prisoners of the five vices of Hinduism, contented themselves with a quick dip at Lanka, before hurrying back to the worldly warmth of their homes. If not a complete *moksha*, it was at least a semi-*moksha*, for they had better gods to worship...

The times have changed. For the Gangotri pilgrim, the last major landmark was the Indo-Chinese war of 1962. In the face of a humiliating defeat at the hands of those they called the 'Chinese ants', India screamed: 'They've provoked a sleeping tiger.' The proud tiger woke up to the sordid nightmare that, let alone sophisticated arms for barbaric wars, he did not even have enough roads and vehicles to reach the frontiers where some war was being fought between the 'red ants' and the Nehruite advocates of the Panchashila. The tiger then decided to let the dead mind their dead, the poor mind their poor, and promptly prepared to fortify the Indian defences through arms deals and intense construction activity in the tall mountains. The Gangotri pilgrim was thus one of the indirect and lucky beneficiaries of a much larger geopolitical game of international boundaries. A handful of years ago, the pilgrim had to walk at least 150 kilometres through puzzling tracks and unpredictable seasons. Now, the obnoxious boon of modern warfare had brought him a bare twenty-eight kilometres from the origin of the sacred Bhagirathi.

Lugging a weighty bag on my shoulder, I walked up to the end of the gravel track. The bag had really begun to annoy me. I had left Paris in a mad rush. Fevered in love, searching for the source of Jaya, probing the roots of my own soul, I had thrown all sorts of things into a large shoulder bag. The little coasters under the bag had served me quite well on several occasions, but here, some 3,000 metres above the sea-level, in the midst of steep climbs and slippery pathways, my 'diplomat' bag was nothing short of a millstone round the neck.

I opened the bag to see what I could dispense with. The more I rummaged through it, the more I realised what I had forgotten to bring along. Since I didn't have much of a choice, I lifted the bag and started walking across the half-constructed bridge which linked the mainland to the track leading to the source of the holy river. Just then I noticed two young inhabitants of the region seated against the backdrop of an election poster. Their pahari banter came slicing through the thick *beedi* smoke.

'*Namaskar, bhaiya*,' I greeted them. They looked at me, puzzled. I greeted them again, but they didn't respond.

'Can you tell me the way to Gangotri please?' I asked.

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'You mean the Gangotri temple?'

'Yes.'

'But there's no point in going there.'

'Why? I am a pilgrim.'

'The temple is closed. This is off-season. It'll open in the summer. Come again with the other pilgrims.' They sounded too abrupt and rude to be Paharis, since the hillfolk are usually quite kind and hospitable.

Turning away, they started chatting and laughing.

'But how do I get to Gangotri?' I persisted.

'We've told you, haven't we? *Vahan ulloo bolte hein*, it's a land of owls these days. There's no point in going there.' They looked at me strangely, as if suspecting my sanity, and asserted:

'There are no priests, no attendants, no beds, no food, there's nothing. What will you do among hooting owls?'

'*Are Baba* just tell me how to get to Gangotri. The rest is up to me.'

'Don't bother about him. He's probably mad.' They looked at each other and laughed, as if sharing a private joke.

'May I have a glass of water?' I was thirsty.

'We don't have glasses here. This is not a restaurant,' one of them retorted rudely.

'But could I have some water, anyway?'

'Go down to the river.'

They looked at me and burst out laughing again. Fed up with their nonsense, I picked up my bag and crossed the river, carefully walking on the steel girders of the incomplete bridge. As I stood puzzled before two tracks that led up the mountain, one of the two cheeky Paharis shouted: 'Go right for Gangotri.' The other added: 'Follow the hooting of the owls, you'll get to the temple...'

I reached the top, gasping and defeated. Physical exhaustion made the trees appear blurred and hazy. I heard some rustling in the thickets. A tiny drooping man, wearing torn black pyjamas and a pair of army boots that slanted like a beret at the heels, walked out of the forest. He was carrying a bundle of fuel wood in his hands. Almost involuntarily, I cried out, '*Bhaiya*, could I have some water please?' Without uttering a word, a yes or a no, he disappeared behind the layers of *deodar* trees, touching each tree trunk as if he were playing a vertical xylophone. The sound of the local Pahari song he was humming gradually faded away as he receded into the distance. A few minutes later, he returned with a pot of water, colder than ice.

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'What are you doing here in the snow and ice?'

'I am going to Gaumukh, the source of Ganga.'

'But this is not the season. The temple is shut.'

'Well, seasons belong to the mind, don't they?' I smiled at him, but he did not have a clue as to what I was saying.

'It's not going to be easy along the way,' he warned me. 'Everything is shut.'

'I'm not worried about that. It's this damned weight on my shoulder that's bothering me.'

'What weight? This little bundle? Come on, *sahib,* this is nothing. A child of seven can carry this in these parts. You should have come during the season. You could have hired a jeep.

'A jeep?'

'You surely know what a jeep is, *sahib.*'

'Yes, of course. But how the hell do they get jeeps across? There's not even a bridge in place yet'

'But there are jeeps here. They've been around for years, since the last war. Rich merchants from the plains buy them in army auctions. They bring the jeeps up to the other end of the road, dismantle them completely, get them across the river and reassemble them again on this end. One trip to Gangotri costs seventy rupees. It's the greatest business going on in these parts. They make *lakhs* each season. So you see, it would be better if you came during the season.' Scarcely had he finished his word of advice than he blew his nose into his hand and pasted a rich dose of mucus on the bark of a lovely pine.

'What do you do?' he enquired.

'I work for a *seth* who lives in Uttarkashi. I set up tea-stalls for him and do odd jobs like bringing wood from the forest, chopping it to size, putting it together, making huts. I have a lot of work. It has to be completed before the pilgrim season begins. During the season, someone from the *seth's* family comes and runs the shop.'

'And you? What will, you do?'

'I work as a porter during the season. There was good money in it earlier, but these days the jeeps have pushed our rates down to thirty rupees a trip.' He suddenly turned towards the west: 'The sun rays are slanting. You'd better be on your way.'

'But wouldn't you like to come along with me?' I tried to tempt him. 'I'll employ you as my porter. You can tell me about life in the mountains, your festivals, how you live, work, eat, ...'

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'What's there to talk about life in the mountains? It's cold, wet, and horrible. But tell me, *sahib*, where exactly do you want to go?'

'Gaumukh or Gangotri. You decide.'

The prospect of off-season employment started to work on the porter and he became thoughtful. He lit a *beedi*, and after a few minutes of silence, muttered:

'What about him?'

'About whom?'

'The *seth*.'

'Come on, it's only for a day. You'll be back tomorrow. One day is not asking for too much.'

'I might get into trouble. No, I don't think I can accompany you. It's asking for trouble.'

I picked up my bag and prepared to leave. Realising that I was not playing his game, he called out aloud: 'Tell me, *sahib,* how much are you willing to pay?' I needed him so desperately that I was prepared to give him anything within my means. I offered him a hundred rupees, three times his normal wage. He turned down the offer: 'Life is so costly these days. What can you buy with a hundred rupee note?' 'A hundred and fifty?' He grumbled for a while, but I stuck to my offer. Finally, without a word, he picked up the bag and whispered: 'But I'll only go up to Gangotri. For this sum, I can't go to Gaumukh.' I accepted. With my bag slung around his head, Ram Bahadur was already trotting a good hundred meters ahead of me. He seemed to have been born with a fifty-kilo weight on his back...

The sky looked clean. It was blue, a strange blue, the blue of a woman's love-bite. Immersed in the overwhelming beauty of the Himalayas, we walked for well over an hour before catching a first glimpse of Gangotri. A cluster of some hundred houses, their architecture blurred by the mist of a restless Bhagirathi, made it seem as if a child had scrawled a village in his drawing-book. Gangotri was deserted. Not a soul in sight. The houses were locked and sealed with red and saffron strips of cloth. Each pilgrims' lodge had a plate showing the region whose pilgrims it welcomed. An air of abandon and death loomed over Gangotri and yet the holy village emanated a peculiar spiritual force. The tiny triangular white flags, the staccato of their flappings and the frenzied music of Bhagirathi, bestowed on this ancient village of Hindu belief a mysterious immortality. Just as Gangotri reinforced belief in the endless cycle of reincarnations, it itself appeared to be the product of infinite cycles of life and death. With abandoned huts and deserted temples, dead and yet immortal, Gangotri described a circularity over life and death...

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We crossed the bridge over Kedarganga, another tributary of the Bhagirathi, when Ram Bahadur knocked at the door of a hut which in the outlandish surroundings of the Himalayas resembled an alpine chalet. A short and stout young man of about thirty, holding a kerosene lamp in one hand and a kitchen knife in the other, opened the door. He smelt of onion and garlic. Shifting his gaze from the porter to me, he smiled warmly. From his hospitable glance I knew I would not I have to freeze to death that night.

'Can you put me up for the night? I am ...'

'Yes, yes, welcome *sahib*. You're most welcome. This is an inspection bungalow.' I was indeed relieved and thanked heaven for having created bureaucrats and ministers on this earth for, otherwise, there would neither be inspections nor inspection bungalows to house wayward pilgrims like me.

'What's your name?' I asked my friendly host.

'Ram Bahadur, *sahib*.'

'My name is Nishant.'

'Have you come from Dehradun, *sahib*?'

'No, no. I've come from Paris. Have you heard of Paris?'

'Oh yes. A very long time ago I saw a Hindi film called *An Evening in Paris*. Lovely city. Paris too has a Qutub Minar.'

'Yes, if you like. A Qutub Minar for New Delhi and an Eiffel Tower for Paris.'

'Is he your servant?' he asked, pointing at the porter.

'No, he is a porter from Bhaironghati. He is also called Ram Bahadur.'

'*Oh sahib*, there are so many *paharis* with this name.'

Ram Bahadur is a very common name among the Nepalese Gurkhas. In fact, in India, for any Gurkha who comes in from Nepal, there is just one name: 'Bahadur'. Bahadur means the brave one, but over the years, the Nepali migrant, rugged and tough, has earned the reputation of being not only a good fighter but also someone who is 'mindlessly faithful' and 'unflinchingly loyal'. It is this dual trait among the innocent inhabitants of the Nepal Himalayas that gave them easy entry into the British Indian Army. Again, it was not altogether an accident that Maggie Thatcher sent out the Nepalese Gurkha regiments to fight her modern colonial war in the Falklands.

Ram Bahadur opened the doors to unbelievable comfort: a room, a big soft bed, clean sheets, a quilt and a kerosene lamp. Accustomed to the caste and class hierarchies of the Indian elite, Ram Bahadur left me to the vagaries of my humour and silently retreated to prepare a make-shift dinner. The other Ram Bahadur, the porter, was already on the road back home, if ever he had one...

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I lit the kerosene lamp, took out my diary and thought of scribbling a few lines in it. 'I've just stepped into a marvellous chalet at Gangotri. It may sound unbelievable, but it's true. It's night. Quiet, a divine quiet which I've never experienced before. It's not a quiet which comes from the negation of sound, but, strangely, from a certain kind of sound which only a river in the mountains can produce. Yes, Ganga proves that the purest silence is a sound.

A lullaby, Ganga grows on me like a smooth wine, dissolving the real into the self. Ganga tip-toes gently into the mind, and there she builds in it, layer by layer, a sandbed of harmony which is the only promise she can offer to the horrors of history. She invokes a unique nostalgia. She makes me believe in a past that never was, a future that will never be...

Hey, Jaya, where are you? So present and so absent. Can you hear me, Ganga? Yes, it's true, nothing heals better than a constant rhythm...'

I noticed a bright yellow glow coming in from the back of the cottage. I walked out. Bahadur had lit a small fire. The firewood was humid. It wept as it burnt.

Agni rekindled in me the desire for Jaya. Was it not on the first night when she lay beside me that I had dreamt of a magnificent golden bush-fire? The fire reduced the healing touch of Ganga to ashes and consummated the unruly, the mad. The flames welcomed me teasingly towards the game of suicide; they sucked me in just when I wanted to be sucked in the most. Just then Bahadur came and announced that dinner was ready. 'Please leave the food on the table, Bahadur. I'll help myself.'

I got up and reached for my bag. Caution rang in my ears for, beyond Rishikesh, alcohol is taboo. In Gangotri it is even sacrilege. Like many others before me, I too was a pilgrim to the mysterious birth of this divinity and I bowed low before her unchallenged might, but I had my own gods to please and my own ends to reach. I pulled out my bottle of rum. Swirling, stumbling and humming *bhajans,* I walked out into the arms of a jet-black night. Above, the sky was meticulously lit, each star in its place giving a providential guard of honour to a pilgrim who had dared heresy in the imperial courts of Goddess Ganga. As I stared deep into her bosom, I noticed that the night resembled my mother, my youthful mother, in a light black veil studded with golden stars, the veil with which my mother carried herself through the severest glances of a bourgeois evening. My mother looked into the mirror, she saw Jaya. Jaya looked into the mirror, she saw Ma. Ma was Jaya, Jaya was Ganga, and Ganga, *Ma.* With all oedipal truths thus complete, I moved, bottle still in hand, towards the historic temple of Gangotri.

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'*Sahib, sahib*.' Someone called out to me. It was dark.

'Yes. Who's it.'

'It's me. Bahadur.'

'What…'

'*Sahib, sahib*,' he pleaded. 'What are you doing?'

'Nothing.'

'*Sahib*, come, the dinner is ready.'

'Yes, Bahadur, I'll be back soon. I must visit the temple before we eat.'

'*Sahib*, what are you doing?' He had obviously seen the bottle of rum in my hand.

'Nothing, I am just going to the temple.

'No, *sahib*. Have some respect for the temple. Don't!'

'If I didn't have respect, Bahadur, I wouldn't have taken the pain to come so far. I'll be back soon.'

'*Sahib, sahib*. This is sacrilege, *sahib*.' His words of caution thus faded into blasphemy.

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The Sage's Wet Hair

Ilija Trojanow

We had barely reached *Rishikesh* when the monsoon unleashed its pent-up violence. We could not drive on because the wipers could not keep pace with the downpour; the world outside could only be sensed. We could not even get out of the car—the water held the doors fast. Within minutes, the whole town was submerged, transformed into an upland delta with burns, ponds, waterfalls and flooded plains. Patience huddled under all the eaves and every roof. Those who were in a hurry had to roll up their trousers, hold their shoes in their hands and venture on to the flooded road—step by step through the unknown. In the middle of the road in front of us, a motorcycle had come to a halt, the exhaust spewing smoke; the two riders sat dazed, their feet ankle-deep in water, while the smoke grew denser and they continued to block the road. A woman in a simple sari crawled across the asphalt, half-swallowed by water, looking for something, coins perhaps, that she or someone else had lost. We were relieved to find a hotel at all on a day like this.

* * *

The most important instrument of contemporary spirituality is the loud-speaker; its volume set high as if the world were deaf. The *ghat* was dominated by an amplifier turned up to the pitch of ecstasy. Eardrums were stretched to the point of rupture. As we were about to leave, we were suddenly admitted to the heavenly abode of a power cut. At the Triveni *Ghat*, naked feet tapped on stones, a broom scraped across the ground, and on the bank murmuring voices circled around water, fire and existence. It was so quiet that I thought I heard the water soaking the saris of the bathing women. A man of noble bearing set down his green shopping basket on the last dry step. His white clothes were crisply pressed. He took out flowers, incense sticks and a *lota*. He performed his prayers

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with measured, exact gestures. Only the lips moved in his face. At the end of his *puja*, he took out a neatly folded newspaper, put his utensils into the basket and covered them with the paper—he seemed to have found solace in the ritual.

He strode away, ramrod straight and calm, and didn't flinch when the loudspeakers started blaring again, joy and sorrow seemed to be one to him. The man disappeared behind a monumental sculpture, put up in 1990 and labelled with a PIN code (No. 753001). It represented the famous scene from the battle of Kurukshetra, the opening of the *Bhagavadgita*: the warrior *Arjuna*, hesitant to join the battle, and the charioteer Krishna; God with a human purpose, as beautiful as Guy Hamilton, who shows the way with an outstretched hand, an apocryphal bird perched on his index finger. Four foaming horses are pulling the battle chariot, *Arjuna*'s face is wrought with anxiety, his breastplate bears a crouching lion about to leap. Everything is straining to attack; it is apparent that *Arjuna*'s qualms will not prevail.

As I left, the bird peeled off Krishna's finger and flew away.

* * *

Strict customs and stipulations about bodily purification are as old as civilization in India. The gods perceived bathing as a source of well-being; the myths are drenched with the cleansing power of water. Even five thousand years ago, in Mohenjo-Daro, the houses of wealthy persons were equipped with bathrooms and toilets; a drainage system led the water from the wells and directed the waste water into the canal system.

In each and every hotel in the country—irrespective of how unkempt or shoddy it may be—the guest can be sure of at least a pail of clean water. In our hotel in *Rishikesh*, the manager seemed to be a step ahead in the spirit of this tradition. A folded sheet of paper requested customers to share his concern for this most valuable environmental resource. He gave a list of possible savings:

Brushing your teeth	Close the tap	save 5–10 litres
Washing the face	Use a towel	save 8–15 litres
Shaving	Fill up the mug	save 8–15 litres
Shower	Turn off shower while soaping	(water-saving data not given)
Leakage	Please inform	save 400–3000 litres immediately

Leakage? If there had been only one leak! I notified reception immediately. A plumber appeared; he tightened and hammered away, but finally

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threw down his tools before the leakage. He defended his workman's pride, blaming the bad piping as water continued to leak from every tap.

* * *

In the Parmarth Niketan Ashram on the other bank of the river, we met Narendra, an old acquaintance, by sheer coincidence. He was a native of *Rishikesh* who had gone to Mumbai to work for Hindustan Lever, to support his family after the death of his father. One day, he realized that he was only working but not living. He had not been able to save anything, because life in Mumbai was so expensive. He returned to *Rishikesh.* On the advice of his mother, he met Muniji, the high priest of the ashram, who talked briefly with him, before offering him a place in the ashram. Narendra used the word *sewa*—service—to describe what he was doing. Sewa, Muniji had said, is to attend to what is closest to one's heart, to do good deeds, to fulfil one's *dharma.* Narendra was happy, he was living again.

We stopped in front of the *gurukul.* Around eighty children, all orphans, were uniformly dressed in yellow robes. They were being imparted the traditional twelve-year training of the brahmachari, initiation into *Sanskrit* and the classical rituals. They were trained according to the old ideals of education—contemplation, the overcoming of desires, adherence to daily ritual, humility and obedience to the *guru.* Parampara, the teaching tradition, is inseparably linked to a *guru* who passes on the knowledge gained from his own *guru* to his disciples. We peeped through the window into a few bare classrooms. The children were sitting on mats along the wall, reciting verses in one voice. They were learning a Vedic hymn by rote, performing a series of exactly prescribed hand movements to match their sing-song recitation—a unique synchronized choreography. The path to error-free memorization leads through a valley of repetition. The more complicated the ritual, the more important it is to execute it perfectly. The slightest error threatens to disturb the cosmic order.

In ancient times, the students of a *gurukul* were divided into two groups: one where the students were trained in theology and the other where the students only learnt by rote (the vedapatis); each sloka was set, to the last detail, in a precisely defined tone and rhythm that did not vary across the country. Although the written work goes back a long way in India, about 1,500 years, orality has always had the upper hand in everyday life. The knitting of word and meaning to tone and rhythm guaranteed the accurate internalization of

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mantras and slokas. To safeguard him from distraction, the vedapati was never initiated into the meaning of the *Sanskrit* texts.

Salvation, while conserving energy

At Hari-Ki-Pairi, the footprint of Vishnu in *Haridwar*, we were intercepted by the uniformed activists of the Seva Samiti. They informed us sternly that donation was our duty for the upkeep of the ghats. A man of small stature and low rank hustled us towards a table behind which the tax collector was seated. With the first sentence I spoke in Hindi, the jurisdiction shifted from the corporal to the officer. Instead of a token donation, a substantial one was now on the cards. The officer opened a notebook and underlined with his nail several documented donations amounting to Rs 5,000, 2,000 and 1,000.

'We are keeping the *ghat* clean.'

'Very good!'

'We are looking after the safety of the pilgrims.'

'Very good!'

'We are looking after this precinct.'

'Very good!'

'We maintain law and order.'

I entered an amount of Rs 100 in the book.

'So little, sir? Hundred rupees, that's nothing for you—give us thousand rupees!'

'Hundred rupees is not much,' I agreed, 'but if I donate thousand rupees at every *ghat* along the Ganges, in Garhmukteswar, in Bithur, in Kanpur, in Allahabad, in Mirzapur, in Varanasi, in Patna, in Monghyr, in Sultanganj and Sahibganj, in Behrampur, in Calcutta and in Ganga Sagar, I'd become a pauper.'

'At the other places,' the man retorted, 'you can donate less—but in *Haridwar* demonstrate your generosity!'

I handed him a hundred-rupee note and laid a one rupee coin on it.

'Wah! This foreigner knows how to donate correctly, Wah! Do you also know why you have to give that extra rupee?'

'Well,' I answered, 'the hundred rupees are for the humans and the one rupee is for god.'

The activists had a hearty laugh; actually the zero is an inauspicious number because it implies the void. The pittance of a donation was excused.

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The proceedings at the Hari-Ki-Pairi were a mixture of picnic, fair and ceremony. Local children used the *ghat* as a swimming pool; they jumped from the pedestrian bridges into the water and let the current zip them to the next bridge, where they clambered up the iron chains that hung like lianas, expressly placed there for this purpose. As daylight waned, the *ghat* filled up; the uninitiated were asked to sit down. Activists of the Seva Samiti stood by the bank within earshot of each other and with hoarse voices made every effort at converting good pilgrims into better donors. A gong was struck, voices tuned up, the activists ducked and vanished like masters of ceremonies who are surprised to find that the curtain has risen.

'Victory to Mother *Ganga*. Victory to Mother *Ganga*.'

Again we were at the mercy of the loudspeakers.

'Whoever thinks of you will have all his desires fulfilled.'

Ever more voices accompanied the loudspeakers, the twilight was lit up by ever more lanterns.

'Whoever finds solace in you shall overcome the sea of existence.'

Oil wicks were lit, the lamps were moved in circles.

'Thanks to your grace there will be light in all the three worlds.'

Directly above the *ghat*, next to a pedestrian bridge, a neon signboard sponsored by Indian Oil was aglow with suggestions that scrolled across it in large red capitals: 'Lower tyre pressure consumes 10% more petrol. Correct switching of gears saves 20% petrol. Whoever sings the *aarti* daily—switch off engine at a signal and save 20% petrol—shall achieve *moksha* effortlessly.'

Pilgrims sent leaf-boats laden with offerings of flowers and burning camphor on a journey. As the boats began to sink, the congregation slowly dispersed.

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Sunrise on the Ganga

Brij V. Lal

> Who breaks his birth's invidious bar,
> And grasps the skirts of happy chance,
> And breasts the blows of circumstance,
> And grapples with his evil star...
>
> To mould a mighty state's decrees,
> And shape the whisper of the throne.
>
> —Tennyson, *In Memoriam*, LXIV

Sunrise on the Ganga. The romance of the idea, to see Hinduism's holiest river, to bathe in it, in a mist-shrouded dawn. I last saw Ganga twenty years ago when I first visited India. I had then bathed in the river and done *puja* for my *girmitiya*, indentured, grandfather. That had been my father's wish. I had also brought for him a bottle of Ganga water, which he regarded as one of his most precious possessions. He put it carefully alongside the green tin which contained important family papers: lease for the native land, birth certificates, a few religious texts wrapped in red cloth, old imperial coins and other relics of the past. My father, like many devout Hindus, believed that a drop of the Ganga on the lips of a deceased person would ensure a safe passage for the departed soul on its journey to the next world. Since my last trip, my father and mother and my two older brothers had passed away. I feel I need to do the pilgrimage for them as well. It is the right thing to do as the eldest male in the family now, whatever my own personal doubts and reservations.

This time, we are travelling with our children. At 21 and 15, Yogi and Niraj would be making their own journeys of discovery. At first they are hesitant and tentative, not knowing quite what to expect. But they are determined to be open-minded. Their mature reaction catches me by surprise.

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They are enthralled by what they see. They look beyond the poverty and the squalor, the dust and the noise, and accept India for what it is: a confusing collage of contrasts. Some things though offend their sense of values. The culturally sanctioned subordinate status of women is one of them. There are others: the institutionalised hierarchy and difference of the caste system, the religious fanaticism rampant in society, the disregard for the damage to the environment caused by rapid industrialisation, the lack of civic consciousness, the pollution of public places, the gulf between the private fetish for personal cleanliness and total indifference to public sanitation. They are astonished by all this, sometimes even outraged, but never judgmental. 'This is India,' they say, only half jokingly. It is their way of coming to terms with the realities of another culture whose contours they vaguely recognise, but of which they are not a part.

For me, twenty years later, some things remain the same or have changed for the worse: the clogged roads have become impossible; greasing the palm is now an accepted way of life; the obtuseness and insolence of public servants have not changed; the pollution of urban areas has become a health hazard; and India, on the whole, has become less a cohesive nation committed to an overarching vision than a coalition of caste, communal and class interests, locked in various combinations of convenience, all devoted more to ensuring their own survival than to promoting national development. This fracturing and fragmentation is, of course, not peculiar to India; it reflects the condition of many developing countries witnessing the resurgence of primordialism. These things do not perturb me as much as they did on my first encounter. I lack passion, my children chide me, and in a sense they are right: I am not as easily disturbed by poverty and pollution and corruption now. They are someone else's problem. The resignation which accompanies age, you might say.

But some things are new. The resurgence of aggressive Hinduism is among them. The ideological commitment to a secular India, once invoked proudly as a mantra for India's future, has weakened unmistakeably. Bal Thackeray, the head of the fundamentalist Shiv Sena, is a household name in India. He is committed to making India a Hindu nation. His '*sevaks*', workers, as members of the Bajrang Dal, Sangh Parivar, the Hindu Vishwa Parishad and other such organisations, disrupt meetings, terrorise members of other faiths, burn Christian churches, kill European missionaries, dig up cricket pitches to prevent Pakistanis playing on Indian (Hindu) soil. They try to impose a moral code of conduct based upon an essentialised reading of Hinduism.

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This public, fanatical demonstration of faith in posters plastered on concrete walls, idols displayed in cars, buses, shops, even government offices, is unsettling to one who is essentially non-religious, at least in the formal sense. Perfectly reasonable people, western-educated, well-travelled, thoughtful, quietly endorse a Hindu identity for India. Hinduism will not solve India's problems, people say, but then, they continue, man does not live by bread alone. People's minds are made up; it is useless trying to change them with facts. The alleged ever-present Chinese threat in the north-east and a nuclear Pakistan flexing its muscle in Kashmir make it easy for the fundamentalists to enlist popular support for their causes.

Another noticeable change in the last two decades has been the impact of technology. Now, India's remotest villages have international telephone booths. The cultural revolution caused by multi-channelled television has been enormous. Western news channels and soap operas of westernised Indian popular culture reach remote villages. A sad casualty of this has been the radio, in the past rural India's contact with the outside world and among the best broadcast services in the world. The effervescence of popular culture has pushed India's classical culture and heritage further into the background. Tradition is for tourists, a vendor tells me.

The opening up of the Indian economy has brought changes and introduced goods into middle-class homes unthinkable two decades ago. The ubiquitous Ambassador cars now jostle on the roads with a dozen other models with Korean and Japanese names. The craze for things 'phoren', so striking twenty years ago, has subsided as modern electronic gadgets once found only in the west are no longer a novelty. Internal tourism has increased by leaps and bounds, with 'luxury' and 'deluxe' hotels sprouting everywhere. These labels should not be taken literally though. Often deluxe means nothing more than that the rooms have western-style toilets, as opposed to the squatting Indian style with water but without toilet paper. The provincial hotels, pricey, leave much to be desired in the quality of service and the standard of comfort they offer, but at least they are there.

Yogi and Niraj are fascinated by the relics of the past they see all around them, in caves, monuments, paintings, forts, castles and temples. Products of the modern electronic age, they seem visibly moved by the sight of *maqbaras*, mausoleums. They are particularly taken in by the 'Chand Bibi ka Mahal' in Ahmednagar in Maharastra. It stands high on a hill, silent, forlorn, unregarded, containing the remains of an emperor's wife and their young children covered with green and red cloth. What romance, what chivalry. They visit

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Fatehpur Sikri, a haunting city of empty, pigeon-nesting buildings deserted after a few years when water ran out. And the Taj Mahal. Why didn't they learn about these monumental achievements of this ancient civilisation in school? What legacy will our contemporary civilisation bequeath to future generations, they ask.

We travel to Bahraich, the district from which my indentured grandfather went to Fiji at the turn of this century. It is still at the back of beyond in a state still notorious for its economic backwardness and social stagnation, a symbol of everything that is holding India back. Caste politics is rampant. The roads are lined with billboards announcing the dates of *sammelans*, conventions, of this or that caste or sub-caste. The Brahmins and Kshattriyas and other higher castes accuse the state government of pandering to the whims of the numerically dominant lower castes. They want monuments erected to their cultural heroes as well. Uttar Pradesh is bad, people say, but Bihar is worse, the name synonymous with lawlessness and criminality. People get some satisfaction from not being at the absolute bottom of the Indian social and political pit.

We drive through the eastern parts of the state in a hired car, a comfort I could not afford twenty years ago. The alluvial plains, partly obscured by a thick fog, are yellow with sarso flowers stretching into the distance. The mango orchards are still there. There is still much idleness, people standing around, drinking tea, lighting small fires to keep themselves warm; the energy and the purpose, the sense of things being on the move, so evident in Maharastra or Haryana, are absent here. But there is some development, sign of small industries, especially brickworks along the highway.

Our village in Bahraich hasn't changed much, with the exception of a few television antennas protruding from thatched roofs. The unpaved roads leading to the village are still covered with raw cow dung and straw. Children are still running around naked and barefoot. People still cover themselves in rags against the cold. Some have found seasonal employment in faraway places like Punjab. They have returned with new attitudes and styles, but they will leave permanently if they can. The older people who had welcomed me so generously have all gone, including Chotu kaka. Their absence is saddening, reminding me of so many others who have died in the last two decades, including members of my own family. I have difficulty establishing a rapport with the younger generation. I am a stranger among them. We have nothing to say to each other except talk about the weather and the crops. I feel slightly embarrassed at the scene around me, and upset at the people for feeling sorry for themselves, hoping for handouts and for miracles to happen. We,

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the descendants of *girmitiyas*, have moved on, but these people, our ancestral cousins, have stayed put, caught in the quagmire of destitution and desolation. There is so much opportunity, so much potential, so little of it realised.

My children are moved by the kaleidoscope of sounds, smells and sights they encounter, but for them this is essentially a strange place full of strange people. Their family genealogy, they tell me emphatically, begins in Fiji, not in this village. Still, they are happy to have made the journey, but enormously thankful for the fate which led their great grandfather to leave. I share their feeling. I embrace people in the village as we take leave after sipping syrupy red tea from a tin cup, knowing that this is my final farewell. It is too painful to tell the people gathered around me, but I know that I will not return to my grandfather's village again. The break is final.

Bahraich had been the highlight of my trip to India twenty years ago. This time around, it is our visit to the Ganga. Benares is cold in winter, this year wrapped in a heavy blanket of fog, *kohra*, disrupting traffic schedules and delaying airplane departures. Benares is the oldest continuous city on earth, our taxi driver tells us proudly, eternal, indestructible. Its narrow, crowded gullies are plastered with election posters and advertisements for everything from modern drugs to a herbal cure for impotence, and crammed with tiny temples and small coves selling holy trinkets. The sacred and the profane, the profound and the mundane, hope and despair mingle in this sacred cradle of Hinduism.

The temples are disappointing. They are not places of silent prayer and solitude and spiritual communion. They are more like busy fish markets. Religion is the main business here, and touts are everywhere. Something about us, the way we dress and walk, our expensive-looking shoes, the backpacks we carry, seeking directions in accented Hindi, reveals our foreign identity. But worse are the *pandya*, professional priests, who prey on the credulous and the gullible and the innocent. They hassle and harass, pull you in different directions to their own temples for special divine benediction.

We are up early, and take the waiting taxi to Dasashvameath Ghat, the main *ghat*, place of prayer and bathing, of Benares. The taxi meanders its way through narrow, foggy streets, honking, overtaking cattle, rickshaws and people making their way to the river. Govind, our driver, who doubles as our guide, has already made arrangements with a boat owner to take us down the river. Touting starts as soon as we get out of the car, but we are guided through a thickening crowd of people to the edge of the river. The water looks muddy grey in the misty early light, the soil slushy and full of rotting marigold flowers. Already people, devoted

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Hindus as well as tourists, are heading out in hired boats, cameras and candles in hand. There is much confusion and commotion. The boatman, an elderly man wearing dhoti and loose kurta and wrapped in a dirty white-brown shawl, buys the material needed for *puja* as we wait. Then we head out into the river.

Before too long, he stopped the boat to pick up a *pandya*. This was not planned for, nor were we informed about it beforehand. I enquire, but the boatman is insistent: there can be no *puja* without a *pandya;* and he was getting us the best *pandya* there was, especially for us. We have heard that before. There is no point arguing: what will be done will be done. The *pandya* is an elderly man, his forehead covered with holy sandalwood paste. He, too, is covered in clothes reeking of sweat and unwashed for days, perhaps weeks. His mouth, surrounded by yellow-white unkempt beard and stringy moustache, is red with the mark of betel nut juice, and his teeth black from years of chewing rough tobacco. I regard the man as an intruder on a private moment of special emotional and spiritual significance for me, and so say nothing to him. The *pandya* looks at me out of the corner of his eyes, assessing, establishing my identity in his mind. He is eager to strike up a conversation. As we make our way to another *ghat* where we will have our dip in the water, he asks me in Hindi where I am from. The South? He guesses South India because of my darker skin. I nod in agreement, to the amusement of my children who have seen me play this game so many times. But like other touts, he senses I am from overseas. Unable to contain his curiosity, he asks whether I have been living abroad for a while. Yes, in Europe, in Liverpool, I say. He nods appreciatively. He tells me he had suspected from the very beginning that I was from England. I didn't ask how or why. I sometimes wonder what he would have said if I told him I came from Australia.

The fog is still thick as our boat weaves its way past other boats and people on the bank paddling in the water. Niraj sights partially submerged carcasses of a couple of rotting cows on the way. He points them out to Yogi who quickly covers her face with a shawl and looks away. The thought of having a dip in the same water a couple of hundred metres downstream fills both of them with horror. The smell of incense wafts through the air. We see people sitting motionless in meditation. The *pandya* leans forward and, in a voice barely above a whisper, talks to me about the importance of the ceremony we are about to perform. It has to be done right, he says; otherwise the souls of all the departed ones will not rest in peace. And particularly since I had come from so far away, I should observe all the rituals and perform all the ceremonies. One must do it with a clean and compassionate heart. I say nothing.

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As we reach our bathing *ghat*, the *pandya* and the boatman disembark and head to the top of a flight of stairs. A couple of people have lit a small fire to keep themselves warm, and there is a *chai wallah* (tea stall) nearby. By now, Yogi and Niraj have decided, completely of their own accord, to have a dip as well. They are adamant; having come this far, they will do what they think is right. Yogi laughs out loud as she sees the words on my bathers 'I am the boss'. How typical of Dad, she says, wanting to be the boss wherever he goes. Niraj and I go in first, making our way into the river through sinking, slushy mud. A couple of metres in, and we hold our noses with our thumb and forefinger and take a dive. My body is almost numb with cold and my mind completely preoccupied with the act of the moment. A few minutes and several dips later, we return to the boat, and Padma and Yogi take their turn. We change back into our dry clothes and head to the small fire at the top of the stairs. About 15 minutes later, Padma and Yogi join us, as we head back to the boat with the *pandya* and the boatman.

The *pandya* performs the *puja*. After the preliminary invocations in Sanskrit, which I don't understand, he asks me the names of our deceased parents. He repeats them and asks us to place small amounts of *puja* material into the fire after he calls out each name. We follow the instructions as most people do on occasions such as this without fully understanding the deeper meaning of what we are doing. At the beginning, I am self-conscious, as other boats full of tourists pass us, gawking, clicking their cameras. But soon I am engrossed in the act, completely oblivious to external intrusions. In the windless mist the tiny yellow flame is hypnotic, mesmerising. A once-familiar but now vanished world flashes across my mind. I see the pictures of numerous gods and goddesses plastered on bamboo walls of our house in Tabia, alongside the portraits of Mahatma Gandhi, Jawaharlal Nehru and famous film stars of my childhood years. I recall the endless *pujas* (*katha*) we used to perform at home with tiresome regularity. Our parents had their reasons, but we children used to look forward greedily to the end of what appeared an endless ceremony so that we could grab the fruit and food offered at the *puja*. We paid scant attention to the wisdom and sage advice of the scriptures. The Sanskrit mantras, recited by the priest with such holy, practised fervour, meant nothing to us.

The flame reminded me of other, terrible, flames I had seen before: flames from funeral pyres of my own family: my parents and my two older brothers, one of whom had died just a few months before this trip. Each of the four cremations was vivid in my mind, the way in which I had received the news of the death, the rituals we had followed on each occasion, the anguish and pain

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the deaths had caused, how each funeral pyre was lit. I experienced each loss anew, and felt privileged and honoured to perform ceremonies for people who had meant so much to me.

After about 20 minutes, the *pandya* stopped, and asked me to make a gift (*daan*) to him. Giving gifts on occasions such as this is customary, but usually it is done at the end of the ceremony. I was perplexed. What sort of *daan* and how much? Oh, it depends, he said. People had given him 50,000 rupees and more. Some had made donations of houses and other property. That I did not believe: this foul-smelling man in dirty clothes could not be a millionaire, as he claimed. There was no way I could make that sort of donation. He looked at me and we haggled; 25,000; 15,000; 10,000. I looked at Padma who was visibly angry at being put in a situation like this. She felt it was an elaborate trap set up by the *pandya* and the boatman. She volunteered 101 rupees. The *pandya* gave out a little derisive laughter. *Bahenji,* sister, you must be joking: what would that small amount fetch these days? But why hadn't the amount been mentioned earlier? It was not good form to talk about these things at the beginning of a sacred journey, the *pandya* said. Unpropitious maybe, but he had a greater hold on me now in the middle of a ceremony than he would have at the beginning. Learned *pandyas* like him were rare and very expensive, but he was being reasonable. When Padma refused, the *pandya* asked her to keep quiet; I was the one to decide, I was the head of the household, and I was performing *puja* for my parents. That was not true, but he had seen me hesitate, and pounced upon it.

I felt awkward, arguing like this in the middle of a ceremony which I had travelled all this way to complete. I offered 1,001 rupees. There was a certain symmetry about the sum, if nothing else. The *pandya* nodded his head accepting it immediately; from the look on his face, I knew that he knew he had done very well: a thousand rupees for half an hour's work; and it was still just breaking daylight. I offer him 500 rupees straight away, but he says that he will collect the full sum from the hotel later, fearing that 500 was all that he might get. He then continued with the ceremony, but I am distracted and do not pay attention. I knew my family was unhappy, even angry; they had been ambushed many times in the past few weeks, and their patience was wearing thin. But there was little I could do.

As we headed back to the bank of the river, the *pandya* had become all soft and solicitous. He talked gently about the importance of gifts. For gifts to have any meaning at all, they had to be given with a good, clean heart; gifts given grudgingly were not good, he said, as he cast a sideways glance at Padma.

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Yogi, still angry at the whole affair, pointedly looked away. *Gupt-daan*, gifts given in strict secrecy, should not be talked about. Specifically, I should not tell anyone how much I had promised to give him. I said nothing, which he took as consent.

On our way back to the car, I exploded at Govind, accusing him of being a part of the ploy to defraud us, but he said he knew nothing about it and we believed him. In fact, he said to us, he had asked the boatman to take us straight to the *ghat*; there had been no talk of a *pandya*. These people had given Benares a bad name, he said with disgust. Our angry reaction had unleashed something deep in Govind. The *pandya* who had accompanied us, he said, was a useless man, a drug addict, a rat. Doped all day, he would bathe in the Ganga at dawn every day, wash off his daily sins, and then prey on some unsuspecting person to indulge his habits. That was the way it was around here. I said nothing.

At the hotel, I reported our misadventure to the manager, holding him partly responsible for what had happened; Govind was the hotel's driver. The manager, O.R. Khanna, listened to our angry complaints. I felt used, ambushed, terrorised. I was adamant: I will pay the *pandya* nothing more than what Padma had offered: 101 rupees. Khanna nodded, and asked the door boy to call the *pandya* in. He walked through the glass door hesitatingly, suspecting that his ploy had gone awry.

'How much do you want, *pandya ji*?' Khanna asked in a sharp, prosecutorial voice. 'Fifty thousand rupees?' '*Saheb ki marzi*,' he said, it was entirely up to me. I could give 50,000, or 500,000. He looked at me. I felt disgust: I did not expect to find fraudulence in men of the cloth. 'I see,' Khanna said, his face reddening visibly with rage. 'Here, take 101 rupees and get out. Fast.' Pointing at the door with his finger shaking with anger, he said 'Get out, or I will have you put in.' He meant the gaol. These vultures, they give us all a bad name, he says to no one in particular as he returns to his paperwork. Govind, who had been watching all this from a safe distance, laughed heartily later when we went out. '*Sahib, aap ne unko khoob chutia banaya*.' 'Sir, what a fool you made of the fellow.' He was happy that, for once, someone else other than the *pandyas* had got the upper hand.

Contemporary India is full of people like the *pandya*, the taxi drivers, the rickshaw pullers, the guides at tourist spots, the sellers of trinkets, people cutting corners, fleecing people, on the make in the quickest possible time. The froth and fluff of popular pop culture, cheap imitations of American television dramas, invade the screen. The other, perhaps idealised, India of my youth and

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imagination is languishing in the background. I feel a stranger now, more so than 20 years ago.

My most enduring memory of this trip is my visit to the Ganga. That image of a small, flickering flame in a tiny earthen vessel, drifting away from me into the distance, gradually devoured by the mist, mingling with others as it makes its journey down the river out into the open ocean. It is a metaphor for life itself, I suppose. It also sums up the way I feel about my grandfather's land. There was no sunrise on the Ganga.

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FICTION

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Padma River Boatman

Manik Bandopadhyaya

It was mid-monsoon, the season for catching *hilsa*-fish along the Padma River. There was no stopping day or night. After dark one could see from the docks a thousand lights flickering like fireflies over the water. All night these lanterns moved over the river's breast like mysterious, unintelligible signals. Sometime after midnight tired eyes closed in the towns and villages, in crowded railway stations and steamer docks. Towards dawn a thin moon rose in the cloud-covered sky. But the lights in the fishing-boats were still not extinguished. Dead white fish now filled the hulls; their silver scales glittered in the lantern-light and their glassy eyes sparkled like moonstones.

Tonight the boatman Kuber was catching fish a mile and a half upstream from Debi-ganj, the village where the railway ended. There were two others in the boat, Dhananjay and Ganesh. All three lived in Ketupur, a hamlet two miles further on. The boat was not big. At the stern there was a tattered thatch awning where they took shelter when it rained. The rest was exposed to the elements. There was an opening two or three feet wide in the boards at the centre through which the fish passed and were collected to the hull. The net hung from one side like the wing of an enormous bird, hanging from a triangular frame consisting of three bamboo poles. The furthest pole was parallel to the side of the boat and the other two were so attached to it as to form a triangle where they crossed a few feet inside the boat's area. These latter were the handles by which the net was raised or lowered.

In deep water the net hung from only two of these poles. Then it opened and shut like the huge beak of a bird. When the net was lowered at the pull of a rope the beak opened wide. As soon as fish had swarmed into this opening the news was carried back along the rope to the fisherman who held it. Then he pulled again and shut the net's mouth while it was still under water, thus trapping the catch.

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The boat belonged to Dhananjay. So did the net. Half the fish caught every night were his share, and the remaining half were divided between Kuber and Ganesh. Since he was the owner Dhananjay also did little of the work. From start to finish he sat holding the stern while the other two worked the handles, raising and lowering the net, and stowing the fish in the hull. The little boat rocked up and down on the waves of the Padma; the lantern flickered in the wind. Not even a stout breeze could waft away the strong odour of fish-scales. Kuber and Ganesh fished, wearing only a loincloth around their thin dark bodies. These were gradually soaked in the splashing water and they were chilled to the bone. They worked on in the cool, moist wind, keeping their eye on the restless current with eyes red from sleeplessness. They fished all night, clasping the oars and turning the boat here and there, casting their net wherever the largest shoals of *hilsa* rose to the surface. The catch was large tonight. But they could not estimate how good their luck was until they knew the price fish brought at Debi-ganj in the morning, if everyone's haul had been good the price would go down and their profit would not be large. But at this season large shoals were rare on the river, so they hoped that others had not caught so many.

Kuber called over the water, 'Jadu, hey-ey-ey... How much fish?'

Jadu answered from a boat a short distance away: 'Plenty.'

The same question came back. The same answer. Then Dhananjay wanted to know the price fish were selling the evening before. When he heard they brought no more than four or five rupees a hundred he began cursing under his breath. Kuber said nothing. He only let the net fall abruptly into the water with a sudden movement.

Kuber was not feeling well tonight. His wife had urged him not to go out. But he had no time to stay at home and look after his health. This year he was afraid he would not have enough money to rent the fishing rights to Akhil Saha's pond at the end of the *hilsa* season. He would have to make do all year on the money he made now fishing on the Padma—not something to depend on. Kuber did not own a boat big enough to fish on the wide river, so he had to be content working on a percentage basis and accept his small share of the profits. When the *hilsa* season was over the Padma turned miserly. It was difficult then to discover where she had hidden her fish-babies in the vast expanse of her waters. A poor fisherman like Kuber could not afford to pay the owners of tidewaters, coastland or canals for fishing rights. Nor buy the expensive net needed to fish in the Padma. And he had no boat. His share of the catch in Dhananjay's small fishing business was not enough to support

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his family all year. Whatever decent wage Kuber made had to be now in the *hilsa* season. At this time of year he could not afford to stay at home a single night.

Kuber and Ganesh took a short rest at midnight and then got back to work again. Towards dawn Kuber said, 'Uncle, let's take a break.'

'Why are you so eager to rest all the time?' Dhananjay replied. 'You can sleep all day when you get home. Cast the net a few more times.'

'I must have a smoke, Uncle. Without tobacco I've no strength in my body. I'm not feeling well tonight, you know.'

The two men raised the net and sat down to rest under the awning. Kuber took down the hookah from where it was hanging and filled the clay hole of the pipe with strong coarsely cut tobacco from a tin box, pressing it down with his fingers. For fuel he rolled a little coconut fibre into a ball and when all was prepared lit the pipe with a single match. Kuber was an expert at this. He had been smoking since he was twelve.

The boat drifted on with the current, Dhananjay steering it lazily with one hand so that it pointed towards one corner of the shoreline. Holding out his free hand he said, 'Let me smoke first, Kuber.'

Kuber reluctantly handed him the mouthpiece and sat sulking. Ganesh sat next to him, shivering as if it were winter. Suddenly he blurted out, 'Cold tonight, isn't it, Kuber?' Receiving no answer he nudged Kuber's knee and repeated, 'You know, Kuber, I'm shivering to death in this cold.'

Of the three, Ganesh was a little stupid. His mind worked slowly. He did not understand when others neglected to listen to what he said and so went on repeating his words until he got an answer. When he was rebuked it was doubtful whether he took it to heart.

Ganesh was devoted to Kuber. He sought his advice on all matters, great or small; to Kuber he came for the solution of his problems. The offices of friendship were exercised a little one-sidedly because of this dependence of Ganesh on Kuber, but a friendship it was nevertheless. The two men worked together and spent their leisure together, sharing happiness and sorrow. Their friendship had its claims and expectations, its quarrels and reconciliations. But as Ganesh was docile by nature they seldom quarrelled.

The three took turns smoking till the tobacco was spent. The boat had drifted some distance. Now Kuber emptied the ashes into the water and hung the hookah back in its place. He and Ganesh lowered the net and took up the oars once more.

'Give us a song, Kuber,' Ganesh urged in a coaxing voice.

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'Sing one yourself,' was the gruff reply.

Ganesh was silent a moment under the rebuke. Then he began singing a folk-song. His voice was not good, but what did that matter? Dhananjay and Kuber listened. The words were something about 'Why do I not get what my heart desires?' It was an old song with a deeper meaning—not an easy song at all.

* * *

They cast their net till there was a red glow in the east, then headed for the steamer dock at Debi-ganj. It was already light by the time they arrived and there was the stir of life in the harbour and along the shore. From time to time a steamer blasted its rowdy whistle, drew anchor and got under way. Other steamers docked, edging alongside the pier. On shore the mail-train had just arrived from Calcutta. Along the river front and in the terminal building all the shops were opening, A great many people had come down to the river for their morning bath. Innumerable cargo and passenger boats were moored in the harbour and the river front was crowded with countless boats of all sizes tied to posts stuck into the mud.

Beyond the harbour the Padma flowed on monotonous as ever. But here there was the ceaseless stir of activity in the water and on shore: the restless current of man's life flowed by on the one and the other.

The landing for fishing craft was on one side of the harbour. Several boats were already in with their catch. The place was extremely noisy, what with the calling and shouting and the quick bargaining over prices. In one breath the fish were bought and sold and arrangements made for their transport. The train stood by to take the morning shipment to Calcutta.

Kuber was glad to come into the morning's bustle. It made him forget the fatigue of the long night. This morning, however, he was not feeling well. Towards the end of the night it had turned quite chilly and his limbs now felt weak from the exposure and exhaustion. Perhaps it was an attack of fever coming on. His eyes were bloodshot. Ganesh had noticed this; he mentioned how red they were some five times or more.

Kuber changed his loincloth for a slightly soiled *dhoti*, a skimpy cloth three yards long, which he wrapped around him as he stepped ashore. A wooden table and an iron chair had been set up on the mud bank. Kedar-nath, the transport clerk, was there supervising the counting of the fish and writing their number in his account book. As soon as a hundred had been counted his servant quickly snatched five, the clerk's due as his commission, and tossed them

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into a large case. As soon as the fish were purchased from the boatmen they were packed into large wooden cases, a layer of fish and a layer of ice by turns. These were then loaded into a boxcar which had been hauled manually along dilapidated tracks from the main line to the riverside. There were four or five of them waiting for the shipment. This morning the mail train would leave for Calcutta on time. In every bazaar there people would come to buy the fish, and the air would be filled from morning to evening with the smell of frying *hilsa* from the Padma.

A short fat man was standing behind one of the boxcars. The long shirt he wore hanging out over his *dhoti* marked him as a bourgeois, probably an office-worker. For some time now he had been trying to catch Kuber's attention. Every time Kuber looked in that direction the man waved to him to come over, but for a while Kuber refused to budge, standing indifferently where he was. At last he crossed over and asked 'What is it, Shital Babu? Do you want something?'

'What do you mean, do I want something?' the man replied in a querulous voice. 'Where are the fish you promised me? Bring them right away, I haven't much time. Bring three.'

'I can't today, Babu.'

'Why not? Didn't you promise to give me fish every day? Go on and get them, and mind you bring three big ones.'

Kuber shook his head. 'Not today. Can't you see Dhananjay's looking my way? Buy your fish in the market this once.'

But the price at which Shital could get fish from Kuber was half that he would have to pay in the market. He was not going to give up hope so easily.

'Give me three fish today, Kuber,' he wheedled. 'Don't be like that. What do you say if I give you a few coins more?'

'Well, all right. Just wait a few minutes.'

Wrapping the lower end of his *dhoti* a little over his chest as if to protect himself from the cold, Kuber went back to the boat. In the boats moored near by there were quite a few men who knew him. They would be suspicious if they saw him covertly taking the fish ashore. He would never live down the shame. But he hoped they were all too busy to notice. After all, who had the leisure to observe whether anyone filched a fish or two from his own boat? Glancing round quickly, he hid three fish under the end of his cloth and went back up the bank. Shital slipped them swiftly into a bag.

'I'll give you the money tomorrow, Kuber,' he said, beginning to walk away. But Kuber followed him.

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'Not so fast, Shital. I want the money now.'

'And I said I'd pay you tomorrow.'

'No, tomorrow won't do. I've got to eat today.'

'I've no money on me now. I'll pay you tomorrow, for sure.'

Shital Babu walked off, digging the toes of his bare feet into the soft mud so as not to slip on the wet bank. Kuber looked after him with bloodshot eyes, cursing him under his breath with the vilest imprecation he could think of: 'Brother-in-law'. Still muttering to himself he went back on deck, stretched himself out and went to sleep.

Ganesh was slow-witted. Before he had time to enquire after the price they would receive for their catch that day, Dhananjay had got rid of him. It was very rare for Dhananjay to get the opportunity to collect the money alone, for Kuber usually stuck to him like a leech, so that as soon as the money was handed over, Kuber knew what his share amounted to. When Dhananjay got back to the boat Kuber roused himself and asked, 'How many fish today, Uncle? Not less than four hundred, I'll be bound.'

Dhananjay looked incredulous. 'Four hundred! A thousand, surely ... There were exactly two hundred and fifty seven. The clerk took seven as his share and paid me for the rest.'

'How can that be?' exclaimed Kuber, starting up. 'Yesterday we caught hardly any fish and the count was two hundred and twenty seven.'

'Are you calling me a liar? Ask Ganesh when he comes if you don't believe me.'

'No need of that, Uncle. You're not the man to lie. It's just that we caught so few fish yesterday and there seemed a lot today. I thought maybe the transport clerk had cheated you.'

Kuber's eyes were heavy with fatigue. Although he had softened his tone, anger and misery surged in his heart and the tears were breaking under his sleepy lids. He was the poorest of the poor, he thought, the most insignificant among the little people. Everyone had a right to deprive him in this way. It was like a custom—the accepted law of society and religion. And he had no right to protest, no right to assert what he knew to be true. Everyone could know of the deprivation and deceit but he was powerless to whisper a word against it.

Dhananjay had sent Ganesh to buy some puffed rice and *gur* cake. They set the boat loose as soon as he returned, to drift downstream. No need for oars. The boat floated on the current towards their village. Ganesh and Dhananjay began to eat but Kuber would take nothing. He drank a few handfuls of water from the river. By now the sun was shining brightly on its crest. Over the

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surface of the water countless suns were burning from the tips of the broken waves. Kingfishers and kites swooped down after their prey. In the distance puffs of smoke from a steamer curled up like smoke-signals. The sun was clear and bright in a sky from which any trace of cloud was absent.

'You shouldn't have come out today, Kuber,' Ganesh said in a burst of sympathy.

There was no reply.

'Shall I massage your forehead?'

'No, don't bother.'

Then, after a moment's thought, Ganesh said, 'If you can hold the tiller, Uncle and I will row and we'll get home quicker.'

* * *

The fishermen's quarter was set apart from the rest of Ketupur. It lay a little to the east, just beyond a small canal. There were plenty of open fields all around it, but the thatch huts were huddled together shoulder to shoulder. At first glance it seemed as if the poor people were depriving themselves needlessly of the open liberality of nature by confining themselves within such narrow bounds. A little thought, and the matter is easily understood. There is no lack of space in this world, but for them there is only this little plot of ground on which to build their huts. The landlord has rights on all the surrounding land and the fisherman's quarter may not spread its boundaries beyond the space rented from him. From one generation to another the huts have been constructed cheek by jowl with each other, for the fishermen cannot afford to pay rent for a space any greater. And so the quarter has grown, each hut almost leaning into the next, until the whole has become a consolidated mass.

The days pass as time revolves on the turning wheel of the seasons. Gradually the mud banks of the Padma crumble as the waves constantly lap at the shore. A new sandbank rises above the surface and an old sandbank, marked on the map for years, disappears beneath the mysterious waters of the river. The crying of children never ceases for a day in the quarter. There is never an end to worshipping the gods of hunger and thirst, of grief and tears, the darkness of the unenlightened soul. The fishermen are caught between society on the one hand and nature on the other. The Brahmins and those belonging to the higher castes keep their distance from the lowly poor. Nature seeks to destroy them with hurricane, flood and storm, and the black monsoon of July. The rain enters the frail huts and makes their bones rattle with cold.

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Sickness comes with loss and misery in its wake. They wrestle and chide each other, exhausting themselves in the process—but there always remains the cruel necessity of survival, a loveless and poverty-striken existence. Here the birth of a child is no joyous event. It goes uncelebrated, sombre. Life is tasted here in want and greed, in lust and the narrow pursuit of selfish interests. And also in the home-brewed wine, fermented from palm toddy or the rice that should have been used to feed hungry children. God might live in the more prosperous quarters of the village, but no trace of him could be found here.

For the most part the men of the fishermen's quarter make their living working on the Padma river and the numerous small waterways and canals. Some fish, some are boatmen. Some, like Kuber, work on the main waters of the Padma, others eke out a living fishing along the canals and in the numerous ponds with a hand-net. The more prosperous boatmen with a craft of their own carry cargoes such as rice, bananas, jute and other commodities across the river and to distant villages. They also ferry passengers from one place to another, for this is a land of water. In the monsoon season most of the fields are covered completely. For a few days every year one can expect the whole countryside to be submerged, with the exception of a few houses built on little hillocks or slightly higher ground. In years when the rainfall is higher than usual the huge rivers of Bengal overflow their banks, bringing various degrees of disaster. Houses, courtyards, fields, are flooded. No trace of a path or *hythe* can be seen. A boat is always needed to go from village to village at this season. Normally the water level falls after a few days. Here and there the mud paths peep out. But for the whole of the following month they are impassable either to vehicle or foot. There is not much wheel-traffic in this region—even wheel-carriages or ox-carts. A man's wealth is in his boat. To get up, to sit down, to do anything or go anywhere, you need a boat.

Boats are used less in the dry season towards the end of winter. March and April are the driest months. Then the canals empty and are sown with paddy. People walk about along the slightly elevated paths which mark the boundary lines between the fields. But though the ponds and smaller waterways may dry up during the sunny winter months this is never the case with the Padma. Boats have sailed on that river for centuries. No-one knows when life along it had its beginnings. The Padma is a branch of the Ganges flowing down from its source in the Himalayas to the Bay of Bengal. Its current runs ceaselessly, untiringly, to the ocean. No-one has ever explored the muddy depths of the mighty Padma. It has guarded its mystery down the ages.

* * *

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Though the fisherman's quarter lay not far from the river Kuber had difficulty walking even this short distance. Ganesh kept up a constant chatter of nonsense all the way. Kuber said nothing. Dhananjay had business in a nearby village and had gone on in the boat.

Ganesh lived nearer the river than Kuber, but he did not enter his house when they reached it. As they went on they passed Nakul Das sitting smoking on his veranda. 'Hey, Kuber!' he shouted when he caught sight of them, 'Here a minute.'

'Kuber's not well; he's got a fever.'

'Has he, now? Well, wait till he hears what's happened up at his place!'

The two of them stopped in their tracks. Of course they could not go on without hearing the news. Kuber asked anxiously, 'What's happened, Nakul?'

'Your wife had a baby last night.'

'But its hardly been nine months!'

'It only takes nine months, you know,' Nakul cackled on seeing his surprise.

Ganesh asked the first sensible question: 'Is it a boy?'

Nakul nodded. 'My daughter Panchi went to see. She said there must be king's blood in Kuber's family, the child's so fair.'

Kuber's dull eyes brightened and Nakul smirked slyly as he remarked, 'You're rather dark yourself, aren't you, Kuber? Where did the fair moon come from, eh? And you're not at home nights. ... If I were you, I'd be a little suspicious.'

Ganesh was angry: 'Kuber's wife is fair, isn't she?'

'Oh, surely. She's fair—quite fair.'

Now the two friends walked on a little more quickly past the back yards of tumbledown huts and unkempt gardens, heading for Kuber's. Ganesh was exuberant, repeating over and over again, 'Aren't you glad it's a son, Kuber? Didn't I tell you it'd be a boy?'

But Kuber was annoyed. At last he said, 'Shut up, Ganesh. What shall I do with another child? We don't have enough to eat as it is.'

Ganesh was hurt: 'Are you cross, Kuber?'

'Well, haven't I a right to be? Do you want to see me die of starvation?'

Ganesh was not quite sure why Kuber had lost his temper. He was not one to reckon about the future. All he knew was that if you had a wife then you had children every so often. He never considered the convenience or inconvenience of the matter, if a human being comes into the world the duty of feeding it is not limited to humans. He who gives life will see to that. That's what he believed. He could not imagine what reason Kuber had to be angry over an

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addition to his family, especially since it was a boy. He gave up the effort of puzzling it further.

Not much can be said of Kuber's dwelling. It consisted of a small yard fenced in with bamboo slatting. On either side of the yard was a tattered thatch hut, and that was all. The narrow veranda of the larger hut was closed off with some straw matting and torn pieces of canvas. A glance was sufficient to tell this was the lying-in room. Kuber's wife, Mala, could be seen lying there through a gap in the wall. Birth is always a messy business and by custom in Bengal it takes place outside the limits of the house.

Kuber went into the smaller verandaless hut. The room was dark even when the sun was at its strongest. A close look was needed to recognize the objects in the corners. On one side was a slightly elevated bamboo platform, the thick staves of its legs planted in the mud floor. Half its area was covered with some tattered bedding, and it was here that his aunt slept, a pillow spattered with oil-blacking under her head. The rest of the space was taken up by metal pots and clay pitchers for storing oil, rice and water. So many containers of various shapes and sizes had not been collected together in Kuber's lifetime; they represented the pathetic frugality of three generations. Underneath this platform some old wooden planks were piled. When Kuber's father was alive he had owned a boat, old and dilapidated and repaired many times over. Afloat, they had to bale out water continually. The boat had still been used up to four years before but in the end it had fallen apart completely and had been impossible to repair. So it had been broken up and the wood from it stored away here.

On the other side of the room there was a small rice-husker, for it was here that the husking took place. Hara-dhan, Kuber's father, had made it from an old piece of wood he had found floating in the Padma. Normally no-one took home any wood from the river. Who could know from whose cremation fire the wood had been brought to the water? Like the corpse itself, the material of a funeral pyre had no place in a man's house. This wood was different, however. Once when Kuber was a boy, so small that even though the son of a Padma boatman he could not yet swim, Hara-dhan had been crossing the river with him in someone else's boat. Suddenly the old craft's bottom had split when they were right in the middle. It was then the month of September, towards the end of the rainy season, when the river was at its fullest. At that point there was a distance of no less than three miles between either bank. For those who grow up along the Padma to swim a mile and a half to the shore, even against heavy waves, while it would cost some effort, is not impossible. If

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Hara-dhan had been alone there would have been nothing to fear. Or if Kuber had been just a little older there would have been no danger. But the little boy was afraid and reluctant to swim. Panicking, he clutched hold of his father. Then that long piece of wood had drifted within reach and they had saved themselves by means of it. It may have been that someone had brought it to the riverside from a pyre, but Hara-dhan could not bring himself to throw it away. And so he gave it this place among his household furniture.

When Kuber's aunt and his daughter Gopi saw him they came into the husking room and began to talk excitedly about the new baby, but Kuber would not speak to either of them. Instead he fell down wearily full-length on the aunt's bed.

'How can you lie down like that?' his aunt chided him. 'Your wife has just given birth to a child. Come and see your son.'

Gopi chimed in, 'Do you know, father, my new brother is as white as a Brahmin's son, and Nakul's daughter Panchi said even English children aren't so light-skinned, didn't she, Aunt?'

Kuber scolded her, 'Why do you call him Nakul? Show a little more respect and call him Uncle.'

Gopi made a long face. 'Why should I show respect to that nasty-mannered old man? Do you know what he said? He asked if the landlord's second son comes to our house at night! Next time he asks I'm going to throw mud in his face.'

'Go ahead, throw as much as you like.'

Kuber turned over and went to sleep. After a while he was wakened by the baby's loud wailing from across the yard. The child might have been born a few days earlier than expected but there was nothing wrong with its lungs. It could certainly bawl.

—Translated from the Bengali by Barbara Painter and Yann Lovelock

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Rām Terī Gangā Mailī

Rām Terī Gangā Mailī, 'Ram your Ganga is dirty' was the last film directed by the famous actor, director and producer Raj Kapoor (1924–1988). Kapoor, along with V.P. Sathe and Jyoti Swaroop, also wrote the screenplay. The film, which is in Hindi, was produced by RK Films and Studios and released in 1985. Although it is not usually placed among the very best of Kapoor's films, critics consider it to be one of his better ones. It had a reasonable success at the box office and one or two of its songs are still popular, among them the song sung by Ganga in the scene which I have translated into English below.

The story-line of *Rām Terī Gangā Mailī* is as follows:

The son of the industrialist Jiwababu (played by Kulbhushan Kharbanda), Narendra (played by Rajiv Kapoor)—called by his nickname Naren—is a young man who has travelled to Gangotri, a pilgrimage centre near the headwaters of the holy Ganga in the Garhwal Himalaya, in order to fill a vessel with Ganga water for his grandmother at home. While on this mission he meets a local village girl, whose name is Ganga (acted by Mandakini), and the two fall in love. Naren has to return home, though he promises to come back to marry Ganga. When Ganga discovers that she is pregnant by Naren, she is unable to contact him. Parallel with the story of Naren and Ganga is a portrayal of the way in which corrupt politicians like Bhagwat Choudhury (Raza Murad) help industrialists like Jiwababu pollute the Ganga River with their greedy schemes. When Naren's family discover that Ganga is pregnant, they refuse to let him have anything to do with her. Instead, they arrange a marriage between Naren and Radha (Divya Rana), the daughter of Naren's father's crony Choudhury. Meanwhile, Ganga has gone to Varanasi, the sacred Hindu city on the Ganga, and has narrowly avoided being raped by a temple priest. As an abandoned single mother with no financial resources, she falls into the clutches of a procuress who sells her to an upmarket brothel. From there she is

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sold on to Choudhury to be his mistress. With the help of Naren's wise Uncle Kunjbehari (Saeed Jaffrey), Naren and Ganga are reunited just as Naren is about to be married to Radha. The film ends with a suitably melodramatic flourish.

The screenplay of *Rām Terī Gangā Mailī*[1] cleverly combines Raj Kapoor's 'obsessive preoccupation with the soiling of "pure" womanhood'[2] with concerns about the industrial pollution of the Ganga River which were beginning to agitate the Indian public in the 1980s.

In its plot the screenplay is rather loosely based on the ancient fifth century Sanskrit dramatist Kālidāsa's play *Abhijñānaśākuntalam* or, in English, *The Recognition of Shakuntala*.[3] It also draws upon an erotic theme that has underlain the mythology of the divine Ganga since at least the time of the completion of the *Mahabharata* in the fourth century CE. This theme is apparent in a passage in the first book of the *Mahabharata* which begins with a mortal king who had lived such a perfect life on earth that he was admitted to the divine world of the gods at his death. One day, the goddess Ganga was in the celestial court when the wind blew up her skirt. All of the gods looked away demurely, but the formerly human king brazenly gazed straight at the goddess. The king's act of erotic impudence caused him to be cursed to be born again on earth and set in train a course of events in which the lure of the Ganga goddess played a leading role.[4]

Ganga in the film *Rām Terī Gangā Mailī* exercises an influence on the other characters very much like that of the goddess Ganga in the *Mahabharata* story, except, of course, that the goddess Ganga, even when she takes the form of a mortal woman, doesn't suffer while the cinematic Ganga spends most of the film in emotional and physical travail.

Though it is sometimes hard to discern under what some consider to be a superficially cosmopolitan veneer, modern Bollywood cinema is a direct heir to Indian, especially Hindu, cultural traditions. *Rām Terī Gangā Mailī* is an outstanding instance of the manner in which one of these cultural traditions, the intricate nature—at once material and divine—of the sacred Ganga, appears in Bollywood film. In the following scene the heroine Ganga, as she meets the hero Narendra, embodies the archetypical seductiveness of the Ganga goddess in her river.[5]

Narendra is very happy as he watches from the bus as the beautiful mountain scenery passes by. He is on a tour to Gangotri with other students from his college. The road is found to be closed at a village a short distance from Gangotri, so

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everyone gets off the bus. Narendra is charmed by the peaceful atmosphere of the attractive village. In his happiness, the name of his dear grandmother comes spontaneously to his lips.

Next morning, Narendra goes down to the Ganga to fill a pot with holy Ganga water for his grandmother and says aloud to himself...

NARENDRA: I have come to get the Ganga for my grandmother and I'll take it back to her.

Ganga, the most beautiful girl in the village, laughs when she hears what Narendra is saying and sees how naive he is. When she laughs the flowers seem to smile. Her sweet laughter so beguiles Narendra that he forgets what he is doing and drops his water pot. The pot rolls off down the hill and Narendra rushes after it, but Ganga catches hold of him:

GANGA: How will you ever find the Ganga, sir, if you embrace death like this. Look what's just one step in front of you!

Narendra comes to himself and realises that if the girl had not stopped him he would have fallen into the Ganga thousands of feet below.

NARENDRA: Who are you?

GANGA: Your life...indeed it was a life or death situation. Someone had to save you, so I came. And, sir, how do you think you're going to take away the Ganga?

NARENDRA: In this water pot.

GANGA: Sir, tell the truth, are you a man or a god? Who knows how long ago Shivaji had Mother Ganga enter into his matted hair and now you have come. Do you expect to take me away in your little water pot?

NARENDRA: What do you mean, do I expect to take you away?

GANGA: Just now you said that you have come to get the Ganga and I myself am Ganga, so...

Narendra gazes at this innocent, pretty girl whose eyes are deeper than the Ganga. She has moved him and he feels a love for her begin to stir in his heart.

Ganga, too, is falling in love with the handsome young man. With her heart singing in happiness at having met Narendra, Ganga goes back to her village and says to the postman...

GANGA: Post Babu, Post Babu, you are the wisest and most thoughtful man in the village so tell me what 'Narendra' means.

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POSTMAN: Narendra, well, a man who is like a god among men is called Narendra.

GANGA: Ever since I met him I've been wondering, is he human or divine?

Meanwhile, Narendra tells his friend Piyush that he has fallen in love with Ganga.

NARENDRA: Piyush, in her face is the guilelessness of the unsophisticated, in her smile is the freshness of flowers, in her laughter is the ripple of waves and in her eyes is the depth of the Ganga.

That night lying on her bed Ganga's thoughts are filled with Narendra. In the morning when she goes down to bathe in the sacred water of the Ganga she is lost in her thoughts of Narendra. She begins to sing this song of her love:

These arms of mine have called you, you will have no other Ganga like this anywhere,
I am your life and your fate, right here will be your salvation,
You must come only to me and I must go only with you,
This Ganga is yours, let there be no delay.
Come to me, now come to me, come to me,
Sometimes from the heights of the mountains, sometimes from over the ridges,
Sometimes with my eyes, sometimes with my tongue I have called you from here, from there,
The one for whom you have come seeking is the very one who has called you.
I am under the mountain and behind the waterfall,
Come to me, now come to me, come to me,
I am furled in the curtains of mist, I have wrapped myself in the waters,
Come to me, now come to me, come to me,
Into the embrace of my arms, into the home of my heart,
Listen, Ganga, those people who have come to your banks have decreed that one's breath may go but one's promise will never depart.
You keep your word, I know you are mine,
I have faith in your promise, I know you are mine.
My heart will sing until you come,
Come to me, now come to me, come to me.

Narendra hears Ganga's sweet voice and is drawn to her.

GANGA: Tell me, how is it that you have come here?

NARENDRA: It seemed to me that these valleys were calling me. Then it seemed that it was the music of these waterfalls. But it was all in you. You were calling someone dear to you, weren't you?

GANGA: Sir, in the hills people say that if you call someone with a true heart then he will come to you.

—Translated by Richard Barz

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Notes

1. Raj Kapoor, V.P. Sathe and Jyoti Swaroop, *Rām Terī Gangā Mailī*, Delhi: Madhur Prakāshan, c.1985.

2. Ashish Rajadhyaksha and Paul Willemen, *Encyclopaedia of Indian Cinema*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1999, p. 473.

3. Kālidāsa, *The Recognition of Shakuntala*, Somadeva Vasudeva, ed. and trans., New York: New York University Press, 2006.

4. *The Mahābhārata*, J.A.B. van Buitenen, ed. and trans., Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1973, pp. 216–24.

5. Raj Kapoor, V.P. Sathe and Jyoti Swaroop, *Rām Terī Gangā Mailī*, Delhi: Madhur Prakāshan, c.1985, pp. 10–13.

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On the Ganga Ghat

Raja Rao

'Palanquin, Palanquin, leave the way, ho, for His Honour, the Palanquin'—this is how we should have been received at Mughal Sarai station, but we're met by self-selling, high-turban-adjusting taxi drivers, their chariots betoken of a forgotten dignity. 'Saab, paisa, money,' said the coolies, trying to get rid of us before the customary hagglings began, thus again that they'd not have to bear their burdens too long. 'Saab, the Gaya Express is coming soon.' Here however two curs introduced themselves, noses up and ears straight, to watch the argument—they also were going to get something from these new customers. One, with long hanging pips, was trying to edge the other, a leansome male, lest there should be the possibility of a gift. 'Even a cur in Benares is blessed,' said the great Sri Sankara, and who can say what these curs were, what ancient souls reborn for their ultimate salvation on the Ganga banks. The bullocks too, from a neighbouring cart, waved their ears. They heard this haggle as if they again would profit from some ultimate benefit. In Benares everything—bullock carts, rags, human excreta (in cones or flat), fallen wayside hay, tree-tops, burnt charcoals, abandoned bus horns, beggars, ugly names on worn walls (may be of politicians)—everything, everything benefits from all acts—for no act here has any consequence. An action must have cause, and effect. In Benares there seems no reason for a cause, thus the result is, no effect. No act breeds an act. And so eternity, the bent meaning of the river.

But night, the all-pervading immemoriality that the earth gives herself for her cogitations, it too was an observant of this haggle. In the silence of the trees a monkey or two woke up. They breathed heavily and went back to slumber. This simian heavy breath created a cry from the hanging bats, and these again thought the Calcutta Mail, which they knew day after day from its raucous, diesel whistle, and from the harsh Punjabi accents of its travellers or the rich Bengali ones—they knew that the haggle would go on. The whole

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night was there for the chase and the hang-to, and, by dawn sweet sleep would come. The midnight hagglers come by the Calcutta Mail and so they are rich. (Even the monkeys by now knew of the air-conditioned coaches.) And where the rich are, the cur and the bullocks—may be even the motor engines of mathematically conditioned reflexes—had known there's always a fight.

'Fifteen rupees to Benares, Saab, and look at my brand new taxi.' Paul to whom this was addressed looked wistfully at the much-torn top and the flabby tyres of the noble vehicle arrayed before us.

'Fourteen rupees and eight annas, sir,' said the young Sikh driver who spoke some English. 'You want to go to the Metropolitan Hotel.'

'Go you,' said an elderly, round-faced and beturbaned colleague. 'They're going to the university. With all your learning, can't you see they're students?'

'Shut up, old fellow. My uncle has gone to Canada and he was there twenty years before you were born. I know what books are. I have studied up to the Matric.'

'Yes, yes, you study up to the Matric,' took up the elder, 'and you drive those rotten taxis, those newcomers that go *phut* every second twist you give to the wheel. Look, sir, look at my old model. I take marriage processions in it, often. And you students, with all your books and luggage, you always take me.'

'No doubt, no doubt. You have a regular nuptial palanquin,' said the youngster with his uncle gone to Canada, and that decided us.

'Paul,' I said, 'let us take this palanquin.' And Paul laughed. The old 1939 model Ford was exactly like a large bullock cart. Its sides (being a larger, and so, older a car) indeed were more torn than those of the smaller Indian ones, made, so to say, but the other day.

'You won't take that palanquin, sir,' said the young man in English almost belligerently. 'The old man does not even have a car licence.'

'We take that palanquin,' I declared, and when we asked the coolies to pile in our luggage, the coolies were pleased. They always liked this Moti Ram, the driver. 'He's a good man, sir,' they assured us, tying up the luggage on the top and back. 'A father of many children. And he's also such a good drummer. You must hear him at Holi.'

'Drummer,' said the young man with Canadian connections, 'his children beat their stomachs for a drum. That's how hungry they are. Poor kids,' he said and turned, tired, to some new customers. This time they were Punjabis, and they could speak the same lingo. And there was a lovely child with the father and the mother. There would be no haggling with them. Five rupees, the

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traveller said, and eight they agreed upon, and thus they entered the car and drove away, before our car had taken its breath to make its august first move.

'How much for your palanquin?' I asked smiling.

'Oh, the Sahib has travelled much, one can see. The other Sahib is an European. Thus you know what to give a poor man.'

Remembering our Indian companion's friendly advice earlier in the train, Paul said, 'Make sure, Raja, what he wants.' I liked our palanquin and its owner. I felt the night had heard enough hagglings. There was even now a large crowd on the platform, the Calcutta Mail was still watering. The vendors were busy, and there was something altogether unconvincing about the high overbridge, the lit train, and the night-alive crowd. The world is indeed the city seen in a mirror, and, upside down.

Strange to say the coolies did not haggle. They just took their wages, and a modest tip, and walked away, their red turbans on their head as if they were going back to dream. The train truly was the dream that ran through their nights. The multiple languages, shapes, and colours of the pilgrims, from the guttural Tamil speakers to the nasal Bengalis—it all seemed too variegated to be concrete. The Mughal Sarai coolies must be among the wisest men in the world. They see more humanity than at any other railway station on this globe. Five hundred million Hindus are their clients, and not just that: their ancestors have come too, to this same Benares, life after life, and thus have established a pilgrim link between man and man. Why should one be born near Mughal Sarai, and be a coolie? In what past life was there a desire to serve pilgrims who go to the Ganga? Mother Ganga always knows. 'I tell you brother, if Mother Ganga did not decide, there would be no Sita Ram or this Bhaiya Ram carrying luggages on Mughal Sarai railway platform. We carry beddings, nightjars, tiffin carriers, punkhas, canes, cradles, vessels, silver tumblers, coconuts, and gold, on our shoulders—sometimes we even carry the ashes of the dead that the mourners bring in red-cloth baskets, we carry the trousseau of the newly wed, we also carry the last possession of those who come to the Ganga to die, old men who know that time is come to give their last breath away, by the Ganges. Such our trade. We revere it. Our fathers have done it. Some say our ancestors were thugs: they worshipped Bhavani, and betimes strangulated travellers for the pleasure of the Goddess. Others say, before the rails came, we were the palanquin bearers of the rich. We have always had to do with travellers. Brother, our job is service to the pilgrim. The great God who sits on the other side of the Ganges, he alone knows what we are, where we go. O, that donkeyson Punjab Express is already there. Run,' they say, as they rush up the gangway.

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Life is so mysterious. Why should you, coolie with a number—87, 54 or 49—stitched on your shirt, alone carry our luggage? Why not one whose number is 55, 31 or 48? What connection of stars linking one with the other, Jupiter with Mercury or Saturn squaring the moon, have created this situation that Bhaiya Ram, Bhagat Ram or Durga Das, coolies of Mughal Sarai, carry our luggage and never will we see them again? How could this be? And the monkeys that were disturbed by our hagglings, the bats that were irritated and the two curs—yes, those two curs, Paul and I will never meet again. Only the Ganges flows, Mother Ganges carrying our memories away. Who could, Lord, who could carry the memory of the millions and millions that have been born since the beginnings began and where have all the dog-and-man-meetings, the bat and the travellers' links, the coolie-and-the-pilgrim-contacts gone? Why was Paul here and he from Chapel Hill, North Carolina, son of my friend Bert who sent him with me to India—a graduation present! And who, I? And who indeed was this Moti Ram driving us into the wild darkness of the night? Where was he taking us? Did he have a licence? Did he know the road to Raj Ghat College? Silence in India is always wise. But over there on the Ganges bank it seems to sparkle. The darkness yields slowly to an unearthly luminescence. Man, do you know you would know if only you knew you knew? And Mother Parvathi presides over it all.

Anna Purné Sada Purné
Shankar Prana Vallabhé...
Bhikshandéhicha Parvathi.

O filled with essence and ever in plenitude,
Beloved to life of Shankara himself,
O Parvathi, give me alms.

Yes, Parvathi alone gives. It is through Her we know Him. How could we know if the door of darkness remained unopened? She opens. She hears your cry, son. She hears because you weep childless, woman. She hears because you've lost your son, old father. In fact, hearing itself is She. And when hearing is just hearing nobody hears: so He is.

Moti Ram, our driver, indeed bore a palanquin. His car made a large variety of noises as we scudded and rode on, startled sometimes by the bright eyes of bullocks from the incoming carts. And then night again slipped by and enveloped all of hearing. Only once a horse-cart jostled past us with a

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chattering group of travellers inside, and the horse was getting a nice lash for every other breath—they had to catch, the travellers had to, the Gaya Express. Gaya is where the Buddha attained enlightenment. Kanthaka, his horse, was that which had arisen life after life, only to be the horse on whom the Buddha would ride to go to his enlightenment.

'Moti Ram,' I said, 'how many children have you?'

'Three, sir,' he answered ever so reverentially. 'I had four. And one of them died.'

'Died of what, Moti Ram?'

'He died of death, sir, that is all. One morning we awoke, and found him dead.'

'Was there some black magic behind it, you think?'

'Who would do magic against a grave good boy? He used to carry fuel from the fuel shop to the Ganga banks for cremations. He had seen too many souls die.'

'No, he must have died of something.'

'Well, sir, we must all die of something. Does it matter the manner he was taken away? His time was come, and he was taken away.'

'And the other three. What do they do?'

'One works at a primary school. He is a peon there. And he takes letters to your Raj Ghat College sometimes. He has seen that great Mahatma, Krishnamurti, sir. The Mahatma probably knows you.'

'Yes, Moti Ram, I have met him once or twice. But I haven't been to Raj Ghat College for many, many years—in fact for fifteen years.'

'Oh yes, sir,' mumbled Moti Ram to himself as if he had made a grave mistake in etiquette, and fell back to silence. The silence now simply whirled as solid space, as if the earth were but a turning top on Shiva's palm. The earth whirls in the pure silence of akasha, of space essence. Man whirls with it too and his words become silences. As the Ganges dissolves all acts of man so does silence dissolve all of speech. Man is never more a pilgrim than when silence carries him from darkness into light. Mother Ganga bends as a moon, as a Crescent Moon, by Benares. Look at that still string of electric lights, a string through the awake night which seems to deepen the river's truth. Once in a while a lean tongue of flame flares up—some dead whose body was being slowly turned to ash, which would finally be dissolved into the Ganga. Pyre, and pyre again, became prominent as we neared the river. The flames seemed so alive, the only nightly action in this visible universe. The string of lights seemed but reflections seen from the other side. Who were they, the one, two,

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or three, which had died, banker, virgin, retired police constable or Maharaja? And the yogis must watch these pyres as they open their eyes after their midnight meditations. The pyre makes death alive. He who has seen a body burn, knows he will never die.

The Dalhousie bridge burst like wide laughter while a funeral is passing by. The girders rippled off their silences but at each rib they seemed to get merrier. The Dalhousie bridge was not laughing at anyone. He was laughing at the immensities he linked, and his ever light burden. And he too having served millions of pilgrims, will one day be broken by flood or war, and he too will fall into the Ganga, though the steel had come from Cumberland or Glasgow. There's hope for everything on earth, man, beast, and iron ore.

One saw neither palace, temple nor minaret of mosque—one only saw the curve of the Ganga. Was Benares a city or a Sanskritic statement? Did not a million people live there? Were there not colleges, universities, judicial buildings, town hall, the palaces of the rich, where were they all? From the bridge there was nothing seen but the sacred river turning, bending in her legendary crescent form, and sprays of gathering upper luminosities, and then the stars. The silence was alarming. The Ford suddenly turned to the right (for, by now, the bridge was crossed over) and cautiously we entered the new suburbs of the city. Walls of plaster, mud or brick, huts, villas, and thatchments—there was not a human breath anywhere. At the railway crossing we saw the only thing awake, the red light, and we entered darkness again. The unreal and the real are so co-adjuscent in Benares you lose trace of the one, while you are wholly with the other. Was there a Raj Ghat College? Did Moti Ram really know it? How could one trust a man with his peasant turban, his big belly, silver bangles on his arm, as Moti Ram? Did he have a licence? Did he too have a Thug ancestor?

Through listless curves and roads without end, which suddenly opened on broader roads, and narrow dips, we emerged at a gate. Moti Ram stopped the car, and a cur started barking. Moti Ram went, opened the gate wide, and the cur raised his voice higher. Who dare come in on this stark night? What man dare, on the Ganges bank, break this deadly darkness? The cur was indeed Yama's dog for he never stopped howling. Through many twists and chugs we came to another gate. We saw almost no houses or huts. Only trees everywhere. There's the terror of Bhavani in every wood. Someone shouted in the night.

'Who's there?'

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'Guests for you, Jagat Ram. This is Moti Ram of the Taxi, speaking. Father of Sachit Ram.'

'Guest? What guest?' the dialogue started.

'What do I know? Name, country? They are Sahibs and that's all I know.'

'How can I open the door,' said the voice, switching on a garden light, 'without knowing their names?'

'Say Raja Rao,' I said.

'Raja Rao Sahib,' cried Moti Ram as if he were announcing a king.

'I know no Raja Rao,' cried back the voice.

'They're big people,' assured Moti Ram, 'very big people, from far off countries. There's also a Sahib there.'

'What Sahib?' shouted Jagat Ram slowly coming towards us. His dog continued to bark sharing the dialogue. 'Who are they anyway?' He knew we were not what we were supposed to be.

'I've written to the Principal. I have sent a telegram. They are expecting me,' I said, getting out of the car. I was tired, and I did not expect this dialogue ever to stop. The dog's bark became viler, we were obviously not wanted.

'Oh,' said Jagat Ram speculating about me from top to bottom. 'Oh, you are the guests the college office was speaking about. They knew somebody was coming. But they knew neither his name nor his address. What could I do? They said, the clerk said, 'Somebody may come in tonight. May be a Sahib too,' they remarked. Even the emissaries of Yama himself can come. Could I let anyone in? Well, however, you are there. Come in.' And he pushed the gate sideways. From then on Jagat Ram never spoke a word. He opened up the guest room, a smallish white washed room with two beds, a soiled table, and proudly showed us the bathroom. Yes, we had a private bathroom, western style. The dog stood outside examining the newcomers. Now and again she would suddenly twist her tail and howl. She was not sure her master should be so trusting. 'Master, do be careful, you never know.'

Meanwhile Jagat Ram was giving us bed sheets and mosquito curtains and pillow cases. Moti Ram brought in the luggage. He stood there on the veranda, as if he had accomplished a holy job. And that was the end of the story.

'You never told me about drums?' I said.

'To the drummer night is like a drum. One hears the beats. You know that's why Lord Shiva has the drum in his hand. He dances in the crematorium, you remember. To beat a leather instrument with God-given hands is easy. But to beat drum that Shiva's silence become sound could only be the gift of Mother Parvathi. He alone beats the drum true, who knows he's never there.'

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'How wonderful,' I remarked hiding my utter clumsiness. 'Is there anywhere I can hear you, Moti Ram?'

'No sir, I beat my drum at home only at prayer time. I beat it that the Lord remove my sins. Every beat rubs off a little of my heavy karma.' I had no words. I gave Moti Ram ten rupees (eight for the ride and two, as baksheesh, I said jokingly), and as he left the door and walked through the garden to the gate, I remembered I would never, never see him hereafter. How auspicious it would be to take the Calcutta Mail, again.

Even after the car had left the dog never stopped barking. After we got into bed, he seemed to remember some forgotten ill we had done to him, and would slowly whine, and suddenly give a bark. Had we done him some harm in another life? Who knows? Every event of life has a double meaning. There is no accident in existence. Yet there is the miracle of chance. To know why you lie on a shaky charpai in this damp building, in what is perhaps the Raj Ghat College Guest House but is, as it were, a nowhere of anywhere, is to ask the question: Who made this rope that wove the charpai? And the tree, the timbers from which the charpai was made? Whence came they? What destiny brought the rope and the string together, and I and Paul to Benares? Event is always single, simple. Event is action without object.

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The Rainbow

Adwaita Mallabarman

The course of the river Titash curves here like a bow.

From one season to another the waterscape changes colors and shapes. Now, at the start of the rainy season, its misty soft colors resemble a rainbow. Green villages line the two sides of the whitish water. Rain falls continuously from the soft gray sky above and rainwater mixes with farmland soil to run in hundreds of brown streams into the white flow of Titash. Together, they create an atmosphere of enchantment, of sweet spiritual rapture, like the world inside a rainbow.

The rainy season advances. The sky disintegrates and the downpour goes on without end. The waters of Titash rise and keep rising, unbounded. Cool air blows briskly, pushes the opaque waters into waves that rock the fishermen's boats and rock even more the flatboats carrying potatoes.

One such boat that started from home some distance away, to sell sweet potatoes at the marketplace, now struggles in the windy rain and rocking waves. It is a small boat filled with large sweet potatoes, one to two pounds apiece. The boat's hull is weighted down by its cargo and seems ready to go under. The rain that falls on the boat's open top and collects at the bottom makes it grow heavier by the minute. If it isn't bailed at once, it'll go any second, with a tiny plop. But the bailer cannot get through the heaps of potatoes to scoop out the water from the bottom of the boat. Kadir Mian is at his wits' end. Woven bamboo leaves tied under his chin make a hat that shelters his head, but his body takes the full force of the slanting rain. Tilting his head sideways, he glances up at the sky, and Kadir's son looks at his father's helpless face. The river that surrounds them appears so empty of other human presence that their heads feel blank and produce no ideas at all. In a resigned voice the father says, 'Those sweet potatoes we grew with so much work, they're all on their way to the world under.' The son says firmly, 'Ba-jan, you swim across

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to Garibullah's banyan tree and save your life. I'll hang on—as long as there's breath there's hope. If I see the boat's sinking, I'll dump the potatoes in Titash's water, take the empty boat to the bank, and call you.'

At that moment they notice the familiar shape of a fishing boat, moving fast through the wide expanse of the river like a water snake heading home at dusk. With two oars splashing and scull creaking, it cuts through the water and sends the waves higher. Afraid that the wash from one of those waves will sink his boat, Kadir Mian calls out, 'Whose boat's that!'

From the tapered stern of the fishing boat, Dhananjay calls to one of the oarsmen. 'Ho Banamali, quick, get the bailer out. I see a potato boat going under.'

Instantly the two oars are pulled in. Dhananjay turns the scull up and pushes down its handle. As smoothly and swiftly as a snake moves its hooded head, the boat swerves left and comes to a dead stop alongside Kadir's boat. Dhananjay's timing is marvelous. A moment later would have been too late.

Then the hands of the five men, three in the fishing boat and two in the potato boat, work with the mechanical speed of a sewing machine needle. Soon the wide hold at the center of the fishing boat is filled with potatoes and the emptied hull of the potato carrier floats up.

Kadir's bamboo-leaf hat still does its job, keeping the ceaseless rain from his head. Overcome with the exhaustion that follows a frantic escape from danger, he sits on the fishing boat's platform and says over and over, 'Malo's sons, you really saved us today, saved us in a big way.'

The rain, which has been falling in a steady rhythm for some time, suddenly goes berserk and launches an all-out attack. Tearing open the sky, the water pelts down with a savage scream: Slash, slash! Kill, kill! The whipping of the wind and the drumming of the rain surround them with deafening noise. Banks, fields, villages all blur in the smoky whitish pall of the driving rain.

Banamali wants to take the boat to the bank to wait it out, but he cannot see any bank anymore. He knows it's not far from there, but he can't see it at all. Dhananjay, working to cover the back end of the dome with a wicker panel, ends his dilemma, 'Banamali-bhai, on this wide curve of the river it's useless to move if you can't see. Stay put right here.'

The two of them lower a thick heavy bamboo pole into the water and, by jointly pushing it again and again, drive it into the riverbed. After tying the boat to the pole with a strong rope, Dhananjay remarks in a decisive tone, 'There! Let the boat turn here with the wind. Now, listen Mians, go sit inside the shed.'

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Noticing Kadir stop short as he heads inside, Banamali says, 'Don't worry. There's no more cooked food in there. Finished eating all the rice and curry we cooked.'

All five are thoroughly wet, and they have no other clothes with them to change into. In the tiny domed shed they sit huddled together, their wet bodies touching. Kadir's hair, now uncovered, is damp and disheveled. His wet white beard slowly drips onto Banamali's wet bare shoulder. Becoming aware of that, Kadir quietly wipes away with his palm the drops his beard has shed on Banamali. At this, Banamali turns his head and looks at Kadir's face. The sight gladdens his heart. The man looks somewhat like Ramprasad of Jatrabari village. A white-gold beard graces his face too, and the expression similarly mixes calm with alertness of mind. Ramprasad is like a descendant of one of those sages—maybe Valmiki—he heard described from the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*. And this man, Kadir Mian? Yes, Banamali now remembers who Kadir Mian reminds him of. That time when during Muharrem stick players performed in the marketplace of Gokanghat, he went to watch; on his way back he ran into a Muslim man also from his village. Listening to his account of the heartrending story of Karbala, Banamali was on the verge of tears. Banamali also heard from him the story of their dear prophet, immensely heroic yet full of tender love for his near ones. Kadir strikes Banamali as if he wears a ray of that immense light of courage and love, quietly sitting here with his beard, touching Banamali's bare shoulder. Sitting close to him makes Banamali feel happy. Indeed, Ramprasad of Jatrabari and Kadir Mian of Birampur too—each is that rare kind of person who gives you a helping hand if you stumble and holds your hand through a long briar-covered way; but then again, if in your sorrow you put your face on that calm chest underneath the beard, cling to him with both hands, and sob away, he doesn't scold you or sternly ask you to stop crying; he just strokes your back like a person who can't help any other way. Banamali's eyes fill with tears. His father, too, was that kind of person, but he is no more. Once on the way home after night fishing, with the wet net on his shoulder, he got caught in a gale and died underneath a tree that fell on him.

Outside the shed, large drops of rain fall on the bamboo panels of the boat's platform and shatter on impact into hundreds of bits. Outside the boat, as far as the eye can see is the river Titash. The countless raindrops pierce the surface of its water like stone chips and make tiny circles of water jump up around each of those points. The wind has dropped; there are no more waves. Yet the entire surface of the river is agitated. And all around them is the

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constant sound—*jha-jha jhim-jhim*—of rain coming down hard on the river's surface. The front of the domed shed is open, but no rain comes inside here. The wind blows from the back, and that opening has been covered, Kadir's gaze is outside the boat, where the raindrops like shafts of arrows shot from some great distance and at great speed pierce the immense chest of the river and trouble it. Banamali holds his towel out to wash in the rain and after wringing it out with care puts it into Kadir's hand. 'Here, trader, wipe your body with this.' Kadir looks affectionately at the young fisherman, at the fresh face and the well-muscled body, before he answers. 'Son, no one in my family has ever been a trader. I've grown potatoes on the silt land. I go to the Saturday markets to sell them. I don't like selling to traders. They haggle too much and never pay if they can buy on credit.'

'Fish traders are the same. Haggling with fishermen, they pay a quarter-rupee where one rupee is due. Then taking the catch to the city, they sell for a rupee what they bought for a quarter.'

Peering ahead where everything is covered with the great round net of rain, Kadir mutters, 'What a downpour! Can't even see if there's any village here.' Of his increasing desire to have a smoke he says nothing. Just then the mind reader in the form of the youth called Banamali reaches for the hookah-lighting setup, which is a small length of bamboo tube with two hollow ends, one holding tobacco and the other a few pieces of pressed coal dust.

Banamali's move worries Kadir's son. He remembers how, when he was even younger, he often accompanied his father to sell milk to the Brahman and Kayastha homes in one village or another. Sometimes they would ask his father to come in and sit for a few words. While they themselves sat in chairs, they would get some kid to fetch a dusty old plank for him to sit on, pouring honey into their words. 'Sit down, Kadir, sit down, have a smoke.' Holding smooth polished hookahs in their hands, they would have a cheap coconut-shell thing brought out for him from under the porch shelf. Kadir enjoys listening as much as he likes talking. Once in conversation, he wouldn't notice where he was sitting and what he was smoking from. He'd simply blow the dust off the hookah they kept for the lowly folk and put his lips to it. So simple a man, he could do it and not mind. He knew they were rich and he was poor, as unmixable as oil and water.

But these are fishermen, they live with hard work and poverty as peasants do. You can't make a show of throwing the dust of respect at them the way you can at the rich higher-ups. No, what you want to do is put an arm around them as equals. Peasants and fishermen have a link nobody can cut even by

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hacking or erase even by scrubbing. Banamali here—he's busy trying to prepare the hookah. Suppose after smoking the full hookah himself, he detaches the chillum with the burning tobacco and offers it to his father? What would he do then? You can be angry at an insult from rich men but not at an insult from your equal. It just cuts through your heart with a knife of pain.

In the midst of this heavy downpour on the river, barely able to keep his head dry, Kadir might perhaps be happy to accept the clay top detached from Banamali's hookah. But when Banamali reaches into the bowl of embers, he finds that wet spray has put it all out.

After their boats have covered the river's arc and cleared the bend, the marketplace comes into view. The rain has stopped some time ago, and now daylight is out, clear on all sides, but not sunlight. Parts of the sky are still congested and somewhere in the distance rain continues. The cool air that blows in gusts from time to time feels like balm on their bodies now hard at work. Although they are not close to the bank they follow, the deep green shadows of its many large trees fall far into the water. Each distinct shadow trembles fearfully at the approach of Kadir's boat before the oars of Kadir's son strike and shatter it to smithereens.

This is the river's left bank. The right bank is almost empty here—no villages, no homes, few trees and shrubs—but just beyond the empty bank are the crop fields, in rows and patchwork that stretch far into the distance, ending at the blurred, shadowy presence of some villages. The wind from that direction, blowing across those fields and across the river, sways the tops of the trees on this bank.

Both boats, one long and one short, come aground together by the ghat of the marketplace. Here the river, after flowing a long way from west to east, turns a corner before flowing south. The ground of that sharp bend holds the marketplace. From the eastern end of the market a thin canal goes straight north. Looking out from that corner ground, you see that the river's sudden turn to face the south makes her long plait of hair fly up north.

On the eastern side of that canal is a village called Aminpur, a sparse village with some jute offices on one side and a few homes and trees on the other. While the market begins to gather on the canal's western side, a rainbow emerges above the trees in the opposite sky. The sun, finally out, hangs low in the western sky. Diagonally across from it in the eastern sky clings a large patch of deep, cool moisture-laden shadow with a hint of rain. The seven hidden colors of sunlight from the western horizon, trapped in the cloudy eastern sky, have produced this rainbow.

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The prolonged fierceness of the downpour that occurred just two hours earlier is quite rare here. Those in the boat out on the river were not fully aware of the amount of rain that fell. Had they been at home, they would have heard the drumming on the roofs, even more deafening than the noise on the river; they would have seen the long furrows cut into the ground by the force of water rolling off the slopes of roofs. A blocked outlet somewhere has turned yards into pools, and in Hindu homes only the little altar of sacred basil remains above the water. Patches of grass that grew in neglect in the corners of the yards now swim happily.

The canal was dry all summer; it was just a trickle a bit earlier in the rainy season. In today's downpour, all the fields flooded. The chunks of earth in the plowed fields crumbled into the rainwater that rose within the ridge-bound fields; then the muddy water flowed over the ridges and on into the canal. From all directions the fields today extend a hundred arms to the canal, offering brimming bounty instead of the usual trickle, spectacular high tide instead of perpetual ebb. The canal that normally borrows from the river just to keep its throat wet today rolls in delight, surges and swells with pride. Celebrating this sudden plenitude, with splashing waves and flowing currents, it pours its excess into Titash. The rain stopped a while ago but the canal still goes on giving; its muddy water still runs in a stream into the river.

Kadir has been feeling thirsty but, scooping up water from the river in his cupped palms, notices half of it is mud. Banamali says to him sympathetically, 'Leave it, you can't drink it. Canal water has ruined river water. I've got relatives in the Malo neighborhood here. I'll take you there after hauling the potatoes.'

'What kind of relatives? You married from here?'

'No. Got a sister married here.'

With Banamali's help, Kadir's potatoes are transferred in no time to the marketplace. To keep them from scattering, Kadir's son twists a bunch of water grass into a thick length and secures it around the pile like a dike. A few small potatoes roll off the pile, skip over the barrier, and run off this way and that. Several ragged small kids who are hanging around dive at them immediately and snatch up what they see as beyond the owner's claims. They are not the children of beggars, but their stunted bodies, scant and dirty clothing, and abnormal keenness make them seem even worse off than beggars. They are everywhere, in all places, all villages and all village markets. Peasants like Kadir who come to sell potatoes do not shout at them or go after them for a few potatoes. They feel sorry for these sad, destitute children and let them keep what they pick

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up, since they have no money to buy. But traders shout at them. If one of their potatoes is touched, the traders slap them, snatch it away, and confiscate even their little collections from spills elsewhere in the market. Such hard slaps on tender cheeks the children take without a sound; pressing a hand over mouth and cheek they quickly leave the spot, afraid of more beating. But when a trader takes away their little collections, when a plea for their return is rewarded only with obscene words abusing their parents, then they cry in muffled sobs. Many times Kadir has come to this market to sell his potatoes and seen these kids year after year at their pathetic collecting of stray potatoes. Some have died; some have grown up and started their own families; others waste away bit by bit slaving for some moneyed trader or some labor-hiring landed big farmer. They may no longer recognize Kadir, and Kadir may not quite recognize one of them in grownup form. But he remembers well how, while unloading his potatoes in a pile on the ground of the market, he has deliberately pushed ten or twenty in the direction of these beggars for mercy. To this day he keeps up the covert giving. Seeing the first arrival of potatoes in the market, bands of these small robbers have all gathered here. They are ready, some with bags made of rag crudely sewn with thread pulled from the border of a worn-out sari, some with clay bowls, some simply gathering up an edge of their waistcloth.

A thought suddenly makes Kadir become the wish-tree. Perhaps he feels like giving away a large part of his pile. But his adult son is with him and might think it's foolish, senseless—bringing potatoes all the way to the market to sell and giving them away instead. Purposefully, in a happy mood, he keeps rearranging his pile of potatoes and sending a good many over the dike his son made. It does not escape his son's notice. 'We haven't made the first sale, haven't opened shop properly, and Father, you're already giving like this!'

Kadir at once comes up with an excuse. 'Buyers don't want any nicked potatoes. They just spend time sorting through the pile and then walk away without buying. Only those I gave away.'

His son grumbles. 'But we haven't even done the prayer before shop opening.'

Kadir smiles openheartedly and replies, 'I just did the shop opening by giving to these helpless orphans. They'll eat and pray for us. Today Allah saved us from a great danger.'

Banamali has been watching Kadir's activities with amazement and delight. Kadir also looks at Banamali's eyes as he explains to his son: 'They're all so unfortunate. Some without a father or mother and they get kicked and

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scolded. Some have a mother but she hasn't got a grain to feed them. Others, motherless, have a father. But, as they say, after the mother's death, father acts like cousin's father-in-law and brother like a wild beast.'

Blowing into the coal of the hookah to light it, Banamali remarks, 'I can see one whose mother just died.'

Kadir's eyes fall on the boy. A tall but very thin boy, his ribs and bones showing, his child's face incongruously stamped with dark sadness. Standing apart from the band of urchins, he holds his large eyes steadily on Kadir's face. While the rest scramble to catch Kadir's rolled potatoes, the way village boys catch raw sugar drops thrown into the air in the name of Hari at festivals, he silently stands aside, perhaps hoping for something from old Kadir's heart. He waits as if he knows the moment the old man notices him, he'll direct toward him and him alone, apart from the other boys, a stream of his compassion. He looks on calmly, as if he's entitled to this gift of love. The expectation in his eyes shows an ever-confident trust; the world would do well to fulfill it—if it does not, he will simply walk away with a sigh.

Kadir picks up two handfuls of potatoes and looks at his eyes, signing to him to come closer, aside from the lot. A smile blossoms on his face, a transparent smile of satisfaction, but it is a pale smile. With the symbols of mourning a mother's death that he wears like a banner, he continues to stand silent rather than come forward promptly at Kadir's call, with the expression of politely turning down an extravagant gift.

'Come on and catch, or they'll take it all.' Kadir now puts the offer into words.

Bashful before this warm generosity, the boy casts his eyes down to his feet, away to one side and the other, toward nothing in particular. Then raising his head he glances ahead once across the canal, at the eastern sky over Aminpur village; the unsolicited riches of Kadir's gift roll on the ground near his feet. And his eyes remain fixed on the sky where they came to rest. Looking steadily there, he is unable to lower his head and bring his eyes back. Kadir looks for the object of his intent gaze but cannot make out anything. Banamali follows his eyes and notices the rainbow in the sky above the trees of Aminpur. That's what holds the boy's gaze.

'Oh, the bow's out. He's watching it,' Banamali says. He is a fisherman. Under the open sky fishermen and peasants go about plowing the water and the land. The sweetness of the coming of light and the sadness of its departure are never hidden from them. But do they ever really watch all those changes in the sky? They notice only the midday sun when it comes down like fire

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scorching their heads. So often in autumn and on winter mornings and afternoons, little clouds in beautiful shades of color float about in the sky. So many times between showers of rain, when the sun briefly opens its shining eye, a rainbow appears in the opposite sky. Do they ever look up and watch those? Maybe they do. But such things never strike their eyes as marvelous or uncommon; they appear and disappear. There is nothing in a rainbow to keep looking at in amazement. A baby in its mother's lap smiles at the sight of the moon and claps its tiny hands in delight. But grown-ups like Banamali never smile at the moon or clap their hands. Muslims like Kadir Mian, during their Ramadan fast, are so eager to see the moon of Id briefly peep from a corner of the sky to bring them messages of happiness and virtue. A thin, pale crescent of glowless moon it is then, what you might call a fragment of the moon. But when the same moon grows full and swims across the clear sky, then they hardly bother to spend time watching it. Similarly, a rainbow is for little ones to watch. It's for this stupid, immature beggar boy to watch. Let him do so, while from near his feet other boys pick up the potatoes meant for him. Banamali feels like picking some up for him. But like the immature boy, he too becomes immature. Yes, indeed, the rainbow is that beautiful to see!

He remembers when his sister was little, she too one day watched the rainbow in amazement. But she didn't watch it so stupidly, oblivious of all else. She had on a pair of glass bangles newly bought for her. She made those bangles tinkle to accompany the clapping of her hands and she chanted a rhyme: 'Rama holds the bow, Lakshmana holds the string. Go rainbow, go back from where you spring.' Little girls believe the chant makes the rainbow slowly fade before their eyes. It's been so long since he visited her last! She's married here, lives in this village. Her husband's place is not far from this market.

—Translated by Kalpana Bardhan

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A Suitable Boy

Vikram Seth

Darkness had come over the sands. The city of tents shone with thousands of lights and cooking fires. Dipankar tried to persuade Pushpa to show him a little of the Mela.

'What do I know of all that world?' she insisted. 'This camp of Baba is my world. You go, Dipankar,' she said, almost tenderly. 'Go to the world—to the lights that attract and fascinate.'

This was a dramatic way of putting it, thought Dipankar. Anyway, it was his second night at the Pul Mela, and he wanted to see what it was like. He walked along, pushed here or there by the crowds, or pulled here or there by his curiosity or instinct. He passed a row of stalls—just about to close for the night—where handloom cloth, bangles, trinkets, vermilion powder, flossy candy, sweets, rations, and holy books were being sold. He passed groups of pilgrims lying down on their blankets and clothes or cooking their evening meal before smoky, improvised fires embedded in the sand. He saw a procession of five naked ash-smeared sadhus—carrying their tridents—wandering down to the Ganga to bathe. He joined a large crowd that was watching a religious play about the life of Krishna in a tent close to the handloom stalls. A lively white puppy rushed out at him from nowhere, and snapped playfully at his pyjamas; it wagged its tail and tried to bite his heel. While not vicious like Cuddles, it appeared to be equally persistent. The more Dipankar whirled around to avoid it, the more the puppy seemed to enjoy the game. Finally two sadhus, noticing what was going on, threw clods of sand at the puppy and it ran off.

The night was warm. The moon was a little over half full. Dipankar walked along, not quite knowing where he was going. He did not cross the Ganga, but wandered along the south bank for a long time.

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Large areas of the Pul Mela sands were demarcated for various sects or orders of sadhus. Some of these large groups, known as akharas, were famous for their tightly knit, militant organization. It was sadhus from these akharas who formed the most striking part of the traditional procession that took place each year at the Pul Mela on the grand bathing day after the full moon. The various akharas vied with each other for proximity to the Ganga, for precedence in the procession, and in the splendour of their display. They sometimes became violent.

Dipankar chanced to wander through an open gate into the huge covered area that marked one such akhara. He felt a palpable sense of tension. But other people, clearly not sadhus themselves, were wandering in and out, and he decided to remain.

This was the akhara of a Shaivite order. The sadhus sat in groups at dull fires that stretched in a line deep into the smoky recesses of the akhara. Tridents were stuck into the ground beside them, sometimes wound around with garlands of marigolds, sometimes crowned with the small drum associated with Lord Shiva. The sadhus were smoking from clay pipes which they passed around from hand to hand, and the smell of marijuana was thick in the air. As Dipankar wandered deeper and deeper through the akhara, he suddenly stopped short. At the far end of the akhara, in a pall of the thickest smoke, several hundred young men, wearing nothing but short white loincloths, their heads shaven, sat around huge iron pots like bees around a row of hives. Dipankar did not know what was going on, but a sense of fear and awe seized him—as if he had come upon a rite of initiation, to view which meant danger to the curious outsider.

And indeed, before he could back away, a naked sadhu, his trident pointed straight at Dipankar's heart, said to him in a low voice:

'Go'

'But I just—'

'Go.' The naked man pointed the trident towards the part of the akhara from which Dipankar had come.

Dipankar turned and almost ran. His legs seemed to have lost all their strength. Finally, he arrived near the entrance of the akhara. He was coughing—the smoke had caught at his throat. He bent over, and pressed his hands to his stomach.

Suddenly he was pushed to the ground by the thrust of a silver mace. A procession was going past, and he was an obstacle. He looked up to see a dazzling flash of silks and brocades and embroidered shoes. And it was gone.

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He was not hurt so much as winded and bewildered. He looked around, still sitting on the rough matting that covered the sandy ground of the akhara. He became aware after a while of a group of five or six sadhus a few feet away. They were sitting around a small ashy fire and smoking ganja. From time to-time they looked at him and laughed in high-pitched voices.

'I must go, I must go,' said Dipankar to himself in Bengali, getting up.

'No, no,' said the sadhus in Hindi.

'Yes,' said Dipankar. 'I must go. Om Namah Shivaya,' he added hurriedly.

'Put your right hand forward,' one of them ordered him.

Dipankar, tremblingly, did so.

The sadhu smeared a little ash on his forehead, and placed some in his palm. 'Now eat it,' he commanded.

Dipankar drew back.

'Eat it. Why are you blinking? If I were a tantrik, I would give you the flesh of dead man to eat. Or worse.'

The other sadhus giggled.

'Eat it,' commanded the sadhu, looking compellingly into his eyes. 'It is the prasad—the grace-offering—of Lord Shiva. It is his vibhuti.'

Dipankar swallowed the horrible powder and made a wry face. The sadhus thought this hilarious, and began to giggle once more.

One asked Dipankar: 'If it rained twelve months each year, why would the streams be dry?'

Another asked: 'If there were a ladder from heaven to earth, why would the earth be populated?'

A third asked: 'If there was a telephone from Gokul to Dwaraka, why would Radha be constantly fretting about Krishna?'

At this they all burst out laughing. Dipankar did not know what to say.

The fourth asked: 'If the Ganga is still flowing from the top-knot of Lord Shiva, what are we doing here in Brahmpur?'

This question made them forget about Dipankar, and he made his way out of the akhara, disturbed and perplexed.

Perhaps, he thought, it is a Question I am looking for, not an Answer.

But outside, the Mela was continuing just as it had been before. The crowds were pouring towards or back from the Ganga, the loudspeakers were announcing the lost and found; the sound of bhajans and shouts was interspersed with the whistles of trains arriving at the Pul Mela Railway Station, and the half moon was only a few degrees higher in the sky.

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'What is so special about Ganga Dussehra?' asked Pran as they walked towards the pontoon bridge along the sand.

Old Mrs Tandon turned to Mrs Mahesh Kapoor. 'Does he really not know?' she asked.

Mrs Mahesh Kapoor said: 'I'm sure I told him once, but all this Angreziyat—this Englishness—has driven everything else out of his mind.'

'Even Bhaskar knows,' said old Mrs Tandon.

'That is because you tell him stories,' said Mrs Mahesh Kapoor.

'And because he listens,' said old Mrs Tandon. 'Most children take no interest.'

'Well?' said Pran with a smile, 'Is anyone going to enlighten me? Or is this another case of chicanery disguised as science?'

'Such words,' said his mother, hurt. 'Veena, don't walk so far ahead.'

Veena and Kedarnath stopped and waited for the others to catch up.

'It was the sage Jahnu, child,' said old Mrs Tandon mildly, turning towards him. 'When the Ganga came out of Jahnu's ear and fell to the ground, that day was Ganga Dussehra, and that is why it has been celebrated ever since.'

'But everyone says that it came out of Shiva's hair,' protested Pran.

'That was earlier,' explained old Mrs Tandon. 'Then it flooded Jahnu's sacrificial ground, and he drank it up in his anger. Finally he let it escape through his ear and it came to earth. That is why the Ganga is also called the Jaahnavi, born of Jahnu.' Old Mrs Tandon smiled, imagining both the sage's anger and the eventual happy result.

'And,' she continued, a happy glow on her face, 'three or four days later, on the full-moon night of the month of Jeth, another sage who had been separated from his ashram went across on the pipal-pul, the bridge of pipal leaves. That is why that is the holiest bathing day of the Pul Mela.'

Mrs Mahesh Kapoor begged to differ. This Pul Mela legend, she believed, was pure fiction. Where in the Puranas or the Epics or the Vedas was any such thing mentioned?

'Everyone knows it is true,' said old Mrs Tandon.

They had reached the crowded pontoon bridge, and it was an effort to move, so dense were the crowds.

'But where is it written?' asked Mrs Mahesh Kapoor, gasping a little, but managing to remain emphatic. 'How can we tell that it is a fact? I don't believe it. That is why I never join the superstitious crowds who bathe on Jeth Purnima. It can only bring bad luck.'

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Mrs Mahesh Kapoor had very definite views on festivals. She did not even believe in Rakhi, insisting that the festival that truly sanctified the bond between brother and sister was Bhai-Duj.

Old Mrs Tandon did not want to quarrel with her samdhin, especially in front of the family, and especially as they were crossing the Ganga, and she left it at that.

North of the Ganga, across the crowded pontoon bridges, the crowds were sparser. There were fewer tents, and here and there the five of them walked across tracts of unsettled sand. The wind struck up and sand blew towards them as they struggled westward in the direction of the platform of Ramjap Baba.

They were part of a long line of other pilgrims who were bound for the same spot. Veena and the older women covered their faces with the pallus of their saris. Pran and Kedarnath covered their mouths and noses with handkerchiefs. Luckily Pran's asthma did not cause him any immediate trouble, though there could have been no worse conditions imaginable. Finally the long trek took the company to the place where Ramjap Baba's thatched platform, raised high on stilts of wood and bamboo, ornamented with leaves and marigold garlands, and surrounded by a great throng of pilgrims, stood on the gently sloping northern sands about fifty yards from the present bank of the river. Here he would stay even when, in a few weeks, the platform would effectively become an island in the Ganga. He would spend his days doing nothing but reciting the name of God: 'Rama, Rama, Rama, Rama,' almost uninterruptedly throughout his waking hours, and often even in his sleep. This was the source of his popular name.

Because of his austerities and because of what people saw as his basic goodness, he had acquired great merit and power. People walked for miles in the sand, faith written in their eyes, to get a sight of him. They rowed out to him from July to September when the Ganga lapped at the stilts. They had done so for thirty years. Ramjap Baba always came to Brahmpur at the time of the Pul Mela, waited for the water to surround him, and left when it retreated beyond his platform about four months later. It was his own quadrimester or chatur-maas, even though it did not coincide in any strict sense with the traditional four-month sleep of the gods.

What people got from him was difficult to say. Sometimes he spoke to them, sometimes not, sometimes he blessed them, sometimes not. This thin

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man, as withered as a scarecrow, burned to the colour of dark tanned leather by the sun and the wind, gaunt, exhausted, squatted on his platform, his knees near his ears, his long head faintly visible over the ledge of the parapet. He had a white beard, matted black hair, and sunken eyes that stared almost sightlessly across the sea of people, as if they were so many grains of sand or drops of water.

The crowds of pilgrims—many of whom were clutching copies of the Shri Bhagvad Charit, a yellow-covered edition of which was on sale here—were held back by young volunteers, who were in turn controlled by the gestures of an older man. This man, who in some sense appeared to officiate over the proceedings, had thick spectacles, and looked like an academic. He had in fact been in government service for many years, but had left it in order to serve Ramjap Baba.

One straggly arm of Ramjap Baba's frail frame rested on the parapet, and with it he blessed the people who were brought forward to receive his blessing. He whispered words to them in a weak voice. Sometimes he just stared ahead. The volunteers were holding the crowds back with difficulty. They were almost hoarse with shouting:

'Get back—get back—please only bring one copy of the book to be touched by Babaji—'

The old holy man touched it exhaustedly with the middle finger of his right hand.

'In order, please—in order—yes, I know you are a student of Brahmpur University with twenty-five companions—please wait your turn—sit down, sit down—get back, Mataji, please get back, don't make things difficult for us—'

Hands outstretched, tears in their eyes, the crowd surged forward. Some wanted to be blessed, some just to have closer darshan of Ramjap Baba, some to give offerings to him: bowls, bags, books, paper, grain, sweets, fruits, money.

'Put the prasad in this shallow basket—put the prasad in this basket,' said the volunteers. What the people had given would be blessed, and having been made sacred would be distributed among them again.

'Why is he so famous?' Pran asked a man standing next to him. He hoped he had not been overheard by his companions.

'I don't know,' said the man. 'But in his place and time he has done many things. He just is.' Then he tried to push himself forward once more.

'They say he takes Rama's name all day. Why does he do so?'

'Wood burns when rubbed and rubbed till it gives you the light you desire.'

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While Pran pondered this answer, the thickly bespectacled man who was in charge of things came up to Mrs Mahesh Kapoor and did a very deep namaste.

'You have brought your presence here?' he said in surprise and with deep respect. 'And your husband?' Having been in government service, he knew Mrs Mahesh Kapoor by sight.

'He—well, he was detained by work. May we—?' asked Mrs Mahesh Kapoor shyly.

The man went to the platform, said a few words, and returned.

'Babaji said, it is kind of you to come.'

'But may we go forward?'

'I will ask.'

After a while he returned with three guavas and four bananas, which he gave Mrs Mahesh Kapoor.

'We want to be blessed,' she said.

'Oh, yes, yes, I'll see.'

Eventually they got to the front. They were introduced in turn to the holy man.

'Thank you, thank you—' whispered the haggard face through thin lips.

'Mrs Tandon—'

'Thank you, thank you—'

'Kedarnath Tandon and his wife Veena—'

'Aah?'

'Kedarnath Tandon and his wife.'

'Aah, thank you, thank you, Rama, Rama, Rama, Rama....'

'Babaji, this is Pran Kapoor, son of the Minister for Revenue, Mahesh Kapoor. And this is the Minister's wife.'

The Baba peered at Pran, and repeated tiredly:

'Thank you, thank you.'

He leaned a finger out and touched Pran on the forehead.

But before she could be hurried along, Mrs Mahesh Kapoor, in a beseeching voice, said:

'Baba, the boy is very ill—he has had asthma since he was a child. Now that you have touched him—'

'Thank you, thank you,' said the old wraith. 'Thank you, thank you.'

'Baba, will he be cured?'

The Baba pointed upwards to the sky with the finger that he had used to bless Pran with.

'And Baba, what about his work? I am so worried—'

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The Baba leaned forward. The escort tried to plead with Mrs Mahesh Kapoor to give way.

'Work?' The voice was very soft. 'God's work?'

'No, Baba, he is looking for a position. Will he get it?'

'It will depend. Death will make all the difference.' It was almost as if the lips were opening and some other spirit speaking through the skeletal chest.

'A death? Whose, Baba, whose?' asked Mrs Mahesh Kapoor in sudden fear.

'The Lord—your Lord—the Lord of us all—he was—he thought he was—'

The strange, ambiguous words chilled her blood. If it should be her husband! In a panic-stricken voice, Mrs Mahesh Kapoor implored: Tell me, Baba, I pray you—will it be a death close to me?'

The Baba seemed to register the terror in the woman's voice; something that may have been compassion passed over the skin-stretched mask of his face. 'Even if so, it would not make a difference to you....' he said. The words appeared to cost him immense effort.

He was talking of her own death. That was what he must mean. She felt it in her bones. Her trembling lips could barely form the next question:

'Are you talking of my death?'

'No....'

Ramjap Baba closed his eyes. Relief and agitation struggled in Mrs Mahesh Kapoor's heart, and she moved forward. Behind her she could hear the voice whispering, 'Thank you, thank you.'

'Thank you, thank you,' it continued to whisper more and more faintly as she, her son, his sister, her husband, and his mother—a chain of love and, consequently, of fear—moved slowly out of the crush onto the open sands.

Sanaki Baba, his eyes closed, was speaking.

'Om. Om. Om.

'Lord is ocean of the bliss, and I am his drop.

'Lord is ocean of love, and I am part and parcel of it.

'I am part and parcel of Lord.

'Inhale the bivrations through the nostrils.

'Inhale and exhale.

'Om alokam, Om anandam.

'The Lord is in you and you are part of Lord.

'Inhale the environment and divine master.

'Exhale the bad feelings.

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'Feel, do not think.

'Do not feel or think.

'This body is not yours ... this mind is not yours ... this intellect is not yours.

'Christ, Muhammad, Buddha, Rama, Krishna, Shiva: mantra is anjapa jaap, the Lord is no any name.

'Music is unheard bivrations. Let music open the centres like lovely lotus flower.

'You must not swim, you must flow.

'Or float like lotus flower.

'OK.'

It was over. Sanaki Baba closed his mouth and opened his eyes. Slowly and reluctantly the meditators returned to the world they had left. Outside, the rain poured down. For twenty minutes they had found peace and oneness in a world far from strife and striving. Dipankar felt that everyone who had shared in the meditation must feel a warmth, an affection for all the others. He was all the more shocked by what followed.

The session was barely over when the Professor said: 'Can I ask a question?'

'Why not?' said Sanaki Baba dreamily.

The Professor cleared his throat. 'This question is addressed to Madam,' he said, stressing the word 'Madam' in a manner that implied an open challenge. 'In the inhalation and exhalation that you talked about, is the effect due to oxidation or meditation?'

Someone at the back said: 'Speak in Hindi.' The Professor repeated his question in Hindi.

But it was a curious question, which was either unamenable to any answer—or which could only be answered by a bewildered, 'Both.' For there was no either/or, no necessary contradiction in the two possibilities of oxidation and meditation, whatever they might mean. Clearly the Professor believed that the woman who had usurped too much power and closeness to Babaji needed to be put in her place, and that a question like this would show up both her ignorance and her pretensions.

Pushpa went and stood to the right of Sanaki Baba. He had closed his eyes again, and was smiling beatifically. Indeed, he continued to smile beatifically through the entire exchange that followed.

Everyone's eyes other than Baba's were on Pushpa. She reverted to English and spoke with spirit, and with cold anger:

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'Let me make it quite clear that quastions here are not addrassed to "Madam" or anyone else but to the Master. If we give teachings here it is in his voice, and we translate or speak because of his vibrations speaking through us. The "Madam" knows nothing. So quastions should be addrassed to the Master. That is all.'

Dipankar was transfixed by the severity of her response. He looked at the Baba to see what he would say. The Baba's eyes were still closed in a smile, and he did not alter his stance of meditation. Now he opened his eyes and said:

'It is as Pushpa says, and I ask her to speak with my bivrations.'

At the word 'bivrations' there was a flash of lightning outside, followed by a clap of thunder.

The master had forced Pushpa to answer the question. She covered her face with a cloth from distress and embarrassment.

Then she spoke with anger and sincerity and embattled defensiveness.

Looking straight at the Professor, she said:

'One thing is a must to say, and that is that we are all sadhikas, we are all learning, no matter how aged, and we must only ask the quastion which is ralevant, not any quastion for sake of quastion only, or to hold an examination of "Madam" or Master or anyone. If you are truly troubled by a quastion then you can ask it—if otherwise, then you will not get grace from the guru. So I should make that clear, and now I will answer the quastion. Because I can tell that we will have more quastion and answer sassion, and I must make all that clear from the beginning—'

Here the Professor attempted to interrupt, but she shot him down.

'Let me speak and finish. I am answering Professor Sahib's quastion, whatever spirit it is asked in, then why should the Professor Sahib interrupt? Now I am not a scientist of oxidation ... oxidation is natural, but it is always there. But what is happening? You may be seeing or hearing, but word or picture as such: what is that? What is effact? It can be different. If you see obscene picture, that will have one effect on you, a strong effect'—she screwed up her nose and closed her eyes in distaste—'and a beautiful picture, different. So, music also. Bhajan music is music, film music also is music, but in one you have certain effact; in other, other. In smell also. It may be burning, but incense burning has wonderful smell, and shoes burning has tarrible smell. Or take prosassions of akharas tomorrow: some are in good spirit, some are fighting. It depends what. And sankirtan also, like this evening: you can have sankirtan with good people, or with bad people.' This was said very pointedly. 'That is why Saint Chaitanya only had sankirtans with good people.

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'So let me tell the Professor Sahib, it is not a quastion "Is it maditation? Is it oxidation?" The real question is: "What is your dastination? Where do you want to go?"'

Now Sanaki Baba opened his eyes and began to speak. The rain was loud, and his voice was soft, but it was not difficult to hear him. The guru's words were calm and soothing, even as they sought to make distinctions and point out errors. But Pushpa shook her head from left to right as her Master spoke, gleefully smiling as he made his telling points, points which she took to be directed against the 'defeated' Professor. It was all so unloving, possessive and defensive that Dipankar could hardly stand it. The violent revulsion of feeling he was undergoing made him see this beautiful woman in a completely different light. She was gloating over her rival's discomfiture in a way that almost made him sick.

The wind was now whistling down the alleys of Old Brahmpur and shaking the pipal tree on the ramp with all its force. The pilgrims who were making their way down were wet through by the time they reached the foot of the Fort. Rain was running down the steps of the ghats, merging with the surface of the Ganga, and gouging out channels in the Pul Mela sands. The face of the moon was almost hidden. Above, clouds scurried confusedly across the sky. Below, men and women scurried confusedly around on the ground—trying to protect their belongings; hammering their tent-pegs more firmly into the sand; and tottering through the lashing rain and howling sand-laden wind towards the Ganga to bathe, for the most auspicious bathing-time—which would last fifteen hours, until about three the next afternoon—had just begun.

The storm was violent enough to blow a few tents away on the Pul Mela sands, and—in the old town above—to flood a few alleys, shake tiles off some roofs, and even uproot a small pipal tree that stood more than a hundred yards away from the ramp that led down to the sands. But these events were soon magnified by darkness and fear.

'The great pipal tree has come down,' cried someone in dismay. And though it was not true, the rumour spread like the erratic wind itself through the crowds of awe-struck pilgrims. They looked at each other and wondered what it all could mean. For if the great pipal tree that stood by the ramp had indeed fallen, what would become of the bridge of leaves, of the Pul Mela itself, or indeed of the very order of things?

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Halfway through the night the storm ceased. The clouds disappeared, the full moon reappeared. The pilgrims bathed in their hundreds of thousands through the night and into the next day.

In the morning the processions of the great akharas began. The sadhus of each order in turn paraded down the main road of the Mela, which ran parallel to the river but a couple of hundred yards up the sands. The display was magnificent: floats, bands, men on horseback, mahants carried on palanquins, banners, flags, drums, whisks, naked nagas bearing fire-tongs or tridents, a huge, barbaric man who yelled holy verses as he brandished a great sword from side to side. Great crowds gathered to gaze at the spectacle and cheer the sadhus on. Hawkers sold flutes, false hair, holy thread, bangles, earrings, balloons, and snacks—peanuts and chana-jor-garam and rapidly melting ice-cream. Policemen on foot—or mounted on horses and in one case on a camel—maintained order. The processions were staggered to avoid confusion—or conflict between one sect of sadhus and another. Since the sadhus were as militant as they were arrogant and competitive, the authorities of the Pul Mela had taken pains to ensure that at least fifteen minutes elapsed between one procession and the next. At the end of their march, the sadhus of each procession took a sharp left turn and made straight for the Ganga, where—to shouts of 'Jai Ganga!' and 'Ganga Maiya ki Jai'—they took an enthusiastic and rowdy communal dip. Then they returned by another, narrower parallel road to their camps, satisfied that no akhara could be more magnificent or pious than theirs.

The great pipal tree above the broad earthen ramp was, as anyone could now see, intact, and would probably continue to flourish for a few hundred years more. It had not, unlike some lesser trees, been uprooted by the storm. The pilgrims continued to arrive in droves at the Pul Mela Railway Station; they passed by the tree, folded their hands in respect and prayer, and began to make the journey down the ramp to the sands and the Ganga. But today, from time to time, whenever a procession passed along the main Mela route by the foot of the ramp, there was a slight obstruction to the cross-traffic and some congestion on the ramp itself. However, it was all taken in good spirit, especially since the ramp provided to many who stood on it a general view of the processions below—and for those pilgrims who had just arrived on this auspicious day, a first view of the whole tent-covered expanse and the holy river beyond.

Veena Tandon and her friend Priya Goyal, together with a few members of their immediate families, were among the crowds looking downwards from

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the ramp. Old Mrs Tandon was there, and so was her grandson Bhaskar, who was very eager to see and count and estimate and calculate and enjoy everything. Priya had managed to escape specifically for this holy purpose from her virtual confinement in the joint family home in Old Brahmpur. Her sisters-in-law and mother-in-law had made a fuss, but her husband, in his mild way, had convinced them on religious grounds; in fact, when her friend Veena had come to fetch her, she had persuaded him to come along as well. As for the men of Veena's own family, none of them were present: Kedarnath was out of town on work, Maan was still in Rudhia, Pran had refused to subject himself to ignorance and superstition yet again, and Mahesh Kapoor had snorted in his most dismissive manner when his daughter brought up the suggestion that he accompany them. Today, in fact, even Mrs Mahesh Kapoor was not with them. She could not bring herself to believe in the scripturally unsanctioned myth of the pipal bridge which was supposed to have spanned the Ganga on this particular day. Jahnu's ear was one thing, the pipal bridge another.

Veena and Priya chatted away like schoolgirls. They discussed their schooldays, their old friends, their families sotto voce whenever Priya's husband appeared not to be listening (including him and his tendency to be more vocal asleep than awake), the sights of the Mela, the most recent antics of the monkeys of Shahi Darvaza. They were dressed up as gaudily as taste permitted, Veena in red and Priya in green. Although Priya planned, like everyone else, to bathe in the Ganga, she wore a thick gold necklace with a design of little buds—for if a daughter-in-law of the Rai Bahadur's house had to be seen out of doors, she could not be seen in unbejewelled nakedness. Her husband, Prem Vilas Goyal, carried Bhaskar on his back to give him a better view. Whenever Bhaskar had any questions, he asked his grandmother to explain things to him, and old Mrs Tandon, though she could not see too well—owing to both her height and her sight—was only too happy to do so. All of them, and everyone around them, was in high spirits. They were surrounded mainly by townspeople and peasants, though here and there a policeman could be seen, or even a sadhu who was not involved in the processions.

It was about ten in the morning, and, despite the previous night's storm, very hot. Some of the pilgrims carried umbrellas to protect themselves from the sun—or possible rain, for the same reason—and because it was a symbol of authority—the more important among the sadhus in the various processions were protected with parasols by their devotees.

The blaring announcements on the loudspeaker continued endlessly, as did the sound of drums and trumpets, and the alternating murmur and roar

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of the crowd. The processions continued, wave on wave: yellow-clad priests with orange turbans, announced by tubas and conches; a palanquin carrying a sleepy old man who looked like a stuffed partridge, preceded by a red velvet banner announcing that he was *Sri 108 Swami Prabhananda Ji Maharaj, Vedantacharya, M.A.*; semi-nude nagas, with a string tied around their waists and a small white pouch for their genitals; long-haired men carrying silver maces; bands of all kinds, one with black tunics and epaulettes of gold braid blaring tunelessly on clarinets, another (the *Diwana 786* band—obviously Muslim from the lucky number that it had adopted—but why had they been hired for this procession?) with red tunics and piercing oboes. One horse-drawn chariot had a fierce, toothless man on it, who shouted 'Har, har ...' at the crowd, to evoke the roared response '... Mahadeva!' Another mahant, fat and dark and with breasts as plump as a woman's, seated benignly on a man-drawn cart, was flinging marigold flowers at the pilgrims, who scrambled for them where they fell on the moist sand.

By now Veena and her party had got halfway down the broad ramp, which was crowded with pilgrims, almost fifty abreast. They were all being pushed forward continuously by the pressure of the pilgrims behind them who were coming from the town or countryside around, or continuing to arrive on the special Pul Mela shuttle-trains. Since there were deep ditches to either side of the ramp, there was nowhere to go but forward. Unfortunately, the current procession of sadhus that blocked their path was advancing more sluggishly than before, probably owing to some obstruction ahead—or possibly in order to prolong their own enjoyment of their popularity with the spectators. People began to get alarmed. Old Mrs Tandon suggested that they try to go back, but this was clearly impossible. Finally the procession moved on, a welcome gap appeared before the next procession, and the crowds on the ramp surged and stumbled forward across the main route into the mass of spectators who lined the other side of the route. The police managed to restore order, and in a few minutes Bhaskar, from Ram Vilas's shoulders, was able to watch the next procession: several hundred naga ascetics, completely nude, led by six and followed by six huge gold-caparisoned elephants.

Bhaskar and his family were still on the ramp, though now only about twenty feet from its base. They had a closer view of things, and with the release of the people in front of them the crush had eased a little. Bhaskar viewed with absolute astonishment the ash-smeared naked men, decrepit or sturdy, their hair matted, marigold flowers hanging from their ears or around their necks. Their grey penises, flaccid or semi-flaccid, hung down and swung to and fro

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as they marched past, four to a row, tridents or spears held high in their right hands. He was too astonished to ask his grandmother what all this was about. But a great cheer, almost a roar, rose from the crowd, and several women, young and middle-aged, rushed forward to touch the feet of the nagas, and to gather the dust on which they had trod.

The nagas, however, would not have their formation disturbed. They turned on them fiercely, brandishing their tridents. The police tried to reason with the women, but to no effect. This went on for a while, some women managing to elude the few policemen posted at the foot of the ramp and succeeding in prostrating themselves for an instant before the holy men. Then, suddenly, the procession stopped.

No one knew why. Everyone expected it to start up again in a minute or two. But it did not. The nagas began to get impatient. Once more the pressure on the ramp began to build, as the arriving crowds were pushed forward, and pushed forward others in their turn. The people who were at the base of the ramp now found themselves crushed by the weight of numbers behind them. A man pressed himself into Veena and, indignant, she tried to turn around. But there was no room. It was becoming difficult to breathe. People all around her were beginning to shout. Some yelled at the police to let them through, others shouted up the ramp to find out what was going on. But though the view was wider, the situation was not much clearer to people higher up on the ramp. They could see that the elephants that led the nagas had stopped because the procession in front of them had halted. But why that earlier procession had stopped was impossible to tell. At that distance, processions and spectators merged into one, and nothing was clear. Replies were shouted down the ramp, but in the shouts of the crowd, the sounds of the drums, and the continuous announcements on the loudspeakers, even these were lost.

Completely bewildered, the crowd on the lower reaches of the ramp began to panic. And when in a few minutes those above them saw that the next procession of sadhus had arrived and now formed a continuous barrier below the ramp, with no gap to come, they began to panic as well. The heat, terrible before, was now stifling. The police themselves got swallowed up in the crowd that they were trying to control. And still the tired, heat-battered, but enthusiastic pilgrims kept arriving at the station, and—ignorant of what was happening below—pushed eagerly forward towards the pipal tree and the ramp in order to get to the holy Ganga.

Veena saw Priya clutch the necklace round her neck. Her mouth was open and she was gasping. Bhaskar looked at his mother and grandmother.

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He could not grasp what was happening, but he was terribly frightened. Ram Vilas, seeing that Priya was being crushed, tried to move towards her, and Bhaskar toppled off his back. Veena managed to get hold of the boy. But old Mrs Tandon was nowhere to be seen—the crowd had swallowed her up in its helpless and irresistible movement. People were screaming now, clutching at each other and stepping on each other, trying to find their husbands and wives, their parents and children, or flailing around for their own survival, desperate to breathe and to avoid being crushed. Some pressed forward into the nagas, who, fearing to be crushed between them and the spectators on the other side, laid into them with their tridents, roaring with anger. People fell, blood pouring from their wounds, onto the ground. At the sight of blood, the crowd reacted with terror, and tried to turn back. But there was nowhere to go.

Some people at the edges of the ramp tried to slip through the bamboo barricades and scramble down to the ditches on either side. But last night's storm had made these steep slopes slippery, and the ditches themselves were filled with water. About a hundred beggars were sheltering by the side of one of the ditches. Many of them were cripples, some were blind. The injured pilgrims, gasping for breath and clawing for a foothold on the slope, now came tumbling down onto them. Some of the beggars were crushed to death, and some tried to flee into the water, which soon turned to a bloodied slush as more of those who were trapped on the ramp sought this, their only route of escape, and fell or slid onto the screaming people below.

At the foot of the ramp, where Veena and her family were trapped, people were maimed or dying. Many of the old and infirm fell to the ground. Some of them, exhausted by the long journey, had little strength to withstand the shock or the pressure of the crowd. A student, unable to move, watched helplessly nearby as his mother was trampled to death and his father's ribs crushed. Many people were literally squeezed to death against each other. Some were suffocated, some succumbed to injuries. Veena saw one old woman, blood pouring out of her mouth, suddenly collapse near her.

There was complete and dreadful chaos.

'Bhaskar—Bhaskar—don't let go of my hand,' cried Veena, clutching him tightly. She had to gasp out every word. But they were thrust to and fro by the great terrified injured mass all around them, and she could feel the weight of someone's body force itself between her hand and his.

'No—no—' she screamed, sobbing with dread. But she felt the small hand slip, palm first, and then digit by digit, out of her own.

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Within fifteen minutes more than a thousand people were dead.

Finally the police managed to communicate with the railway authorities and stop the trains. They set up barriers on the approach routes to the ramp, and cleared the area below and around the ramp. The loudspeakers started telling people to go back, not to enter the Mela grounds, not to watch the processions. They announced that the remaining processions themselves had been cancelled.

It was still not clear what had happened.

Dipankar had been among the spectators on the other side of the main route. He watched with horror the carnage that was taking place less than fifty feet away but—with the nagas between him and the ramp—there was nothing he could do. Anyway, there was nothing he could have done except get killed or injured. He did not recognize anyone on the ramp, so tightly packed was the crowd. It was a hellish scene, like humanity gone mad, each element indistinguishable from the other, all bent on a kind of collective suicide.

He saw one of the younger nagas stab furiously at a man, an old man who had in his terror tried to force his way to safety on the other side of the procession. The man fell, then rose again. Blood was streaming from wounds on his shoulder and back. With horror, Dipankar recognized him as the man whom he had met in the boat, the hardy old pilgrim from Salimpur who had been so insistent upon the correct spot for bathing. The man tried to struggle back, but was flung down by the crowd as it surged forward again. His back and his head were crushed by the trampling feet. When the crowd next surged back at the point of the tridents, the mangled body of the old man remained, like a piece of debris washed up by the tide.

Meanwhile, a number of VIPs and army officers, who had been watching the great spectacle of the processions from the ramparts of the Brahmpur Fort looked down in disbelief at the scene far below them. The panic began so suddenly, and the whole thing was over so quickly, that the number of motionless bodies lying on the ground when the terrified mob had finally been able to ooze away was unbelievable. What had happened? What arrangements had gone wrong? Who was to blame?

The Fort Commander, without waiting for a formal request, immediately sent troops down to help the police and the Mela officers. They began to clear bodies away, to take the injured to the first aid centres and the corpses to the Pul Mela Police Station. He also suggested immediately setting up a central control

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room to deal with the aftermath of the disaster. The temporary telephone exchange that had been set up for the Mela was taken over for this purpose.

Those VIPs who had wanted to bathe on this auspicious day were on a launch in the middle of the Ganga when the captain came up to them in great agitation. The Chief Minister and Home Minister were standing side by side. The captain, holding out a pair of binoculars, said to the Chief Minister: 'Sir—I fear there is some trouble on the ingress ramp. You might wish to take a look for yourself.' S.S. Sharma took the binoculars wordlessly and refocused them. What had looked like a slight perturbation from a distance suddenly came alive to him in all its horrifying actuality. His mouth opened, he closed his eyes in distress, and opened them again to scan the upper reaches of the ramp, then the ditches on either side, the nagas, the embattled police. He handed the binoculars to L.N. Agarwal with the single word: 'Agarwal!'

The Home Minister's first thought was that in the ultimate analysis he might be held responsible for this calamity. Perhaps it is unjust to consider this thought atypically unworthy. Even in the worst calamities of others, some part of our mind, often the one that is quickest to respond, tries to brace itself for the vibration that will reach us from the epicenter. 'But the arrangements were perfect—I went over them with the Mela officer myself—' the Home Minister was about to say, but a second thought stopped him in his tracks.

Priya. Where was Priya? She had planned to go to the Mela today with Mahesh Kapoor's daughter—to watch the procession, to bathe. Surely she was all right. Surely nothing could have happened to her. Torn between love for her and fear of what might have happened, he could not say a word. He handed the binoculars back to the Chief Minister. The Chief Minister was saying something to him, but he could not understand what he was saying. He could not follow the words. He hid his head in his hands.

After a while, the fog in his mind thinned out, and he told himself that there were millions of people at the Mela today, and that the chances, the real chances, of her being one of the unfortunate people caught in the stampede, were very small. But he was still sick with worry for his only child. May nothing have happened to her, he said to himself. O God, may nothing have happened to her.

The Chief Minister continued to look grim, and speak grimly to him. But apart from the sharp tone, the Home Minister caught nothing, understood nothing. After a while he looked at the Ganga. A few rose-petals and a coconut were floating on the water near the launch. Pressing his hands together he began to pray to the holy river.

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Beginning Again

Amitav Ghosh

I had thought that on the way to Lusibari my face would lose the flush it had acquired in Morichjhāpi: the brisk air of the river would cool my skin and the rocking of Horen's boat would slow the pace of my heart. But no, exactly the opposite happened; with every turn a new vista seemed to open in front of me. I could not keep still. I put away my umbrella and stood up, opening my arms as if to embrace the wind. My dhoti became a sail and I a mast, tugging the boat towards the horizon.

'Saar!' cried Horen. 'Sit down; the boat will roll over—you'll fall.'

'Horen, you are the best of boatmen. You'll find a way of keeping us afloat.'

'But Saar,' said Horen. 'What's the matter with you today? You don't seem like your old self'

'You are right, Horen: I am not my old self any more. And it's you who's responsible.'

'And how's that, Saar?'

'Wasn't it you who took me to Morichjhāpi?'

'No, Saar. It was the storm.'

Forever modest, our Horen. 'All right, then. It was the storm.' I laughed. 'It was the storm that showed me that a man can be transformed even in retirement; that he can begin again.'

'Begin what, Saar?'

'Begin a new life, Horen, a new life. The next time we come to Morichjhāpi my students will be waiting. I'll teach as I have never taught before.'

'And what will you teach them, Saar? What will the lesson be?'

'Why, I'll tell them about—'

And what indeed was I to tell them about? Expert boatman that he was, Horen had found a way of spilling the wind from my sails.

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I sat down: this was a matter that needed careful thought.

I would start, I decided, with magical tales of the kind to which these children were accustomed. 'Tell me, children,' I would begin. 'What do our old myths have in common with geology?'

This would catch their interest. Their eyes would narrow, they would puzzle over my question for a minute or two before giving up.

'Tell us, Saar.'

'Goddesses, children,' I would announce in triumph. 'Don't you see: goddesses are what they have in common.'

They would look at each and whisper, 'Is he teasing? Is this a joke?' Presently a small, hesitant voice would speak up: 'But, Saar, what do you mean?'

'Think about it,' I would say, 'and you'll see: it's not just the goddesses—there's a lot more in common between myth and geology. Look at the size of their heroes, how immense they are—heavenly deities on the one hand, and on the other, the titanic stirrings of the earth itself—both equally otherworldly, equally remote from us. Then there is the way in which the plots go round and around in both kinds of story, so that every episode is both a beginning and an end and every outcome leads to others. And then, of course, there is the scale of time—yugas and epochs, Kaliyuga and the Quaternary. And yet—mind this!—in both, these vast durations are telescoped in such a way as to permit the telling of a story.'

'How, Saar, how? Tell us one of these stories.'

And so I would begin.

Maybe I would start with the story of Vishnu, in his incarnation as a divine dwarf measuring out the universe in three giant strides: I would tell them about the god's misstep and how an errant toenail on one of his feet created a tiny scratch on the fabric of creation. It was this pore, I'd tell them, that became the source of the immortal and eternal Ganga that flows through the heavens, washing away the sins of the universe—this was the stream that would become the greatest of all the earth's rivers.

'The Ganga? Greatest of all rivers?' They would rise up, provoked beyond endurance by my mischievous phrasings. 'But, Saar, many rivers are longer than our Ganga: the Nile, the Amazon, the Mississippi, the Yangtze.'

And then I would produce my secret treasure, a present sent to me by a former student—a map of the sea-floor, made by geologists. In the reversed relief of this map they would see with their own eyes that the Ganga does not come to an end after it flows into the Bay of Bengal. It joins with the

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Brahmaputra in scouring a long, clearly marked channel along the floor of the bay. The map would reveal to them what is otherwise hidden underwater: and this is that the course of this underwater river exceeds by far the length of the river's overland channel.

'Look comrades, look,' I would say. 'This map shows that in geology, as in myth, there is a visible Ganga and a hidden Ganga: one flows on land and one beneath the water. Put them together and you have what is by far the greatest of the earth's rivers.'

And, to follow this, I decided, I'd tell them the story of the Greek goddess who was the Ganga's mother. I would take them back to the deep, deep time of geology and I would show them that where the Ganga now runs there was once a coastline—a shore that marked the southern extremity of the Asian landmass. India was far, far away then, in another hemisphere. It was attached to Australia and Antarctica. I would show them the sea and tell them about its name, Tethys, in Greek mythology the wife of Oceanus. There were no Himalayas then and no holy rivers, no Jamuna, no Ganga, no Saraswati, no Brahmaputra. And since there were no rivers, there was also no delta, no flood plain, no silting, no mangroves—no Bengal, in other words. The green coastline of Tamilnadu and Andhra Pradesh was then a frozen waste with ice running to depths of sixty metres. Where the southern shore of the Ganges now lies was a length of frozen beach that dipped gently into the waters of the now-vanished Tethys Sea.

I would show them how it happened that India broke away suddenly, a hundred and forty million years ago, and began its journey from Antarctica to the north. They would see how their subcontinent had moved, at a speed no other landmass had ever attained before; they would see how its weight forced the rise of the Himalayas; they would see the Ganga emerging, as a brook on a rising hill. In front of their eyes they would see how, as India travelled, the Tethys shrank, how she grew thinner and thinner as the channel closed. They would watch as she withered—the two landmasses finally colliding at the expense of the mother ocean: they would see her dying but they would shed no tears, for they would see also the birth of the two rivers in which her memory would be preserved, her twin children—the Indus and the Ganga.

'And do you know how you can tell that the Sindhu and the Ganga were once conjoined?'

'How, Saar?'

'Because of the "*shushuk*"—the river dolphin. This creature of the sea was the legacy left to the twins by their mother, Tethys. The rivers nurtured it and

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made it their own. Nowhere else in the world is the shushuk to be found, but in the twin rivers, the Ganga and the Sindhu.'

And if their interest wandered, I would tell them, in the end, a love story, about a king called Shantanu and how, on the banks of the great river, he spotted a woman of dazzling beauty. This was, of course, none other than the Ganga herself, but the king had no knowledge of this. On the banks of rivers even the most temperate men lose their heads. King Shantanu fell in love, wholly, madly; he promised the river goddess that he would grant her whatever she wanted, if she chose even to drown her own children he would not stand in her way.

A single besotted moment beside a river, and thus was launched a parva of the Mahabharata.

Why should a schoolmaster deny that which even the old mythmakers acknowledge? Love flows deep in rivers.

'Children, this is the lesson; hear it in the words of the Poet:

"To sing about someone you love is one thing; but, oh,
the blood's hidden guilty river-god is something else".'

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The Drowsiness of Chait Dulls the Spirit

Rudra Kashikey

Introduction

At the beginning of this story the author introduces the Burva Mangal Mela. Dating from the early 1700s, this mela, *or fair, is a near-legendary event, a four-day, musical extravaganza that used to be held on boats anchored in the middle of the Ganges. Perhaps the fair's origin so long ago accounts for the enigmatic name which literally means 'old Tuesday' or 'old joy.' Memories of the fair from its last years in the 1920s leave us with a vivid idea of how it was celebrated. For the wealthy of the city, the fair was an occasion to ostentatiously display their social position, as well as to share generous amounts of food,* paan, bhang, *and alcohol. Many accounts tell of the dancing women and singers, the other small boats selling flowers, sweets and other accessories, and of the final, all-night music festival at the Maharajah's palace.**

*The fair's decline probably resulted from a change in the sense of decorum in matters relating to the public display of wealth. Perhaps the growing popularity of the independence movement's socialist values made the idea of the elite of the city lavishly and openly enjoying themselves seem in bad taste. Today, however, the Burva Mangal is remembered fondly for its association with an old-fashioned sense of what it meant to have a good time in Banaras. The joys of yesteryear—*bhang, paan, *classical, and folk music, excursions to the countryside, and an easy, laid-back* musti *attitude toward life—seem to be increasingly replaced by films and their popular music, television, and liquor.*

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* Vishwanath Mukherjee, *Yah Banaras Hai*, Varanasi, Vishwavidyalay Prakashen, 1973, pp. 61–67, and Nita Kumar, *The Artisans of Banaras*, Princeton University Press, 1988, pp. 127–131.

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The title of this story comes from a Bhairavi, *a type of classical music sung only in the morning. The* Chait *of the title refers to the Hindu month which falls in March/April. This is a special time of the year when the weather starts to change from the coolness of winter to the heat of summer. Neither too cold, nor too hot, the weather of Chait is ideal for nighttime activities such as fairs, singing contests, and even lovemaking. The reference in the title to the drowsiness of* Chait *is a reference to the after-effect of all this nocturnal activity and the increasing heat.*

(1)

The 78-year-old *Pundit* Padmanand Pandey had spent the night writhing in bed like a badly-wounded fawn. To forget his anxiety, he stepped out on his roof into the southerly wind of dawn and started to pace. He noticed that, even in spring, dark rain clouds had started to fill the sky. In the distance, the *Burva Mangal Mela* was rolling on the waves of the Ganges. He tried to see the festival, but with his dim eyesight, he could only make out scattered, reflected light on the water.

Then he heard the melodious tone of a *Bhairavi,* penetrating the canopy of air, clashing with his ear drum: 'The youth of one's life is a companion for only a few days!'

Padmanand, agreeing with the statement of the woman singer, shook his head and said, 'It's true, the joy of one's youth is short-lived!' and his stooped back bent even more.

On the floor below, his young woman tenant, Ganga, had come to sweep the courtyard. The dawn's darkness slowly decreased; the sky became red. Padmanand descended the steps entering the courtyard. Recognizing the sound of his footsteps, the two cows tied there perked up their ears; a weak mooing sound issued from their mouths. Padmanand entered the courtyard and stood staring for some time at the two large-framed, but bony, cows—Nandani and Kamdhenu. He took a deep breath and went into a long, wide room next door where the fodder was stored and looked around. In one corner, at most half a kilo of straw was mixed with dirt and mud. He sifted out about four fistfuls and added a liter-and-a-half of water in the cows' troughs. Immediately, the two broke excitedly for the anticipated meal. A moment later, however, they lifted their heads to look at Padmanand. Tears came to his eyes, as if to say, 'I myself have been hungry for several days, mother cows! What can I do?'

Meanwhile, Ganga was sweeping in front of her room in the courtyard, and at the same time, noticing out of the corner of her eyes what was happening

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to Padmanand. She saw his tears—quickly wiped away with a tattered cloth. Approaching him hesitatingly, she said, 'Sir, this month has already started. For several days, I've been thinking that I should pay the rent in advance; but I haven't had any money. Now it's come. Should I give it?' Padmanand remained silent. Ganga went into her room and returned. Handing over a five-rupee note, she said to Padmanand, 'Sir, take it all. Two-and-a-half rupees are for this month and two-and-a-half for next month.'

Padmanand, taking the money, asked, 'You don't have five more rupees, do you? I need ten very badly.'

Ganga said softly, 'I really don't have any more, but wait here a minute.' She called out, 'Hey, Gango, has your mother returned from bathing?' Hearing Ganga's call, a five- or six-year-old girl came out of another room in the courtyard. She answered, 'Yes, sister, mother's back. She's counting her prayer beads. What is it?'

Instead of answering, Ganga went to Gango's mother and, handing over her silver bangles said, 'Loan me five rupees. You can hold on to these for security, mother of Gango. In a month, we'll settle and I'll give you two paise for every rupee in interest.'

Hearing about the two paise for every rupee, Gango's mother could not refuse. If Ganga had not mentioned the interest and, instead, had just asked for a loan of five rupees, surely Gango's mother would have straightaway answered, 'I keep all my money in Rai Sahib's house. He won't give it to me without a good reason. He'll say that, after I die, the money is for Gango.' But she was not able to resist the chance of effortlessly earning ten paise every month, so she took Ganga's bangles and gave her the money. When Ganga handed it over to Padmanand, the old man's face lit up, and he left the house right away.

(2)

As if he'd attached feathers to his feet, the old man flew through the twisted lanes of *Kashi*. Seeing him hastily leave the house, Ganga thought he was going to get food for himself and fodder for his cows. So, she would surely have been surprised to see that the old man, raised at a time when people did what they said, was not going to the markets at Vishesvarganj or Khojwa where the city's main food supply centers were located. Rather, his aim was a dilapidated house in one dark lane. When the old man got there, he rattled the hasp on the door. Immediately, a heavy woman with peppered hair and a few broken teeth opened the door and asked, 'Did you bring the money?'

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'Yes, I've brought it,' Padmanand answered placing the two 5-rupee notes in the woman's outstretched hands, 'but how did you know I was bringing it?'

'Oh, I knew you'd bring it,' the old woman answered, choking with affection.

The two of the them were standing in the sunset of their lives. Both of them knew that the dusk of the great night of death was in front of them. Nonetheless, their conversation was colored with youthful affection, filling their empty hearts like dawn's first hopeful rays. Padmanand laughed and asked, 'Tell me how you knew that I'd bring you this money without your even asking for it? Tell me how you knew that I'd come to this door in spite of having been insulted so often by your sons, Bal Ram and Bakheru?'

The old woman laughed heartily, and then like a young girl, she teased him with the words of the poet *Bihari:* 'She says, "yes," but then ... no!' Then, getting serious, she said, 'Well, you! How were you able to know? You're a man, aren't you? Men only see the outer beauty. But a woman has intuition. She doesn't only see outside, but she can peek inside, as well. You get my point?'

'Even if he didn't get the point before, I'll make sure he gets it now,' said Bakheru Ram, who had come from his room threatening with a shoe raised in one hand.

Bakheru Ram was born hating his mother, Sonamati. His father, Buddhi Dutt Pandey, on the other hand, was an idiot from the day he was born, and easy to deceive. But his mother! In his own words, she was nobody's fool, and so she blocked his freedom. Fortunately for Bakheru Ram, from his childhood, he had known something about his mother that had given him the confidence of a lion in dealing with her.

Almost 50 years ago, when this Sonamati, at the age of 15, was married, she had gone to live in the house of her husband's younger cousin—this old Padmanand. At that time, several events occurred in the family. First, there was the sudden death of Padmanand's wife. The rumor was that she had killed herself. Even though Padmanand had disposed of most of his wealth, spending lavishly on music and other artistic events, enough money remained for him to marry again. Nonetheless, he surprised everyone and refused to remarry.

A few days after this decision not to remarry was made, Buddhi Dutt, who had been very dependent for money on his cousin, Padmanand, refused to stay in the family house and went out to rent another place.

In spite of Buddhi Dutt's move, Padmanand started to go to his cousin's house and to receive the same respect he always received from his cousin's wife, Sonamati. To society at large, this relationship was viewed with distaste; but to Bakheru Ram it was like a weapon to pierce his mother's heart.

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Recently, Buddhi Dutt was taken sick. There was no money to send him for treatment. But the insolent Bakheru Ram, not understanding the generosity of Padmanand, was now attacking him with his shoe. The old Padmanand broke out crying. Sonamati enraged, shouted, 'Look you fool. You just hit your own father with a shoe! Your father is not Buddhi Dutt Pandey. He's impotent,' the old woman shouted. Bakheru Ram was shocked, and his distraction allowed Padmanand to slip away.

(3)

Mumbling to himself insanely, Padmanand wandered all day. At sunset, he went to Harischandra Ghat and watched a group of children playing a game on steps they had hacked out of the mud deposited by the Ganges's flood.

Standing on the highest step, a girl asked, 'Fish, fish, how deep is the water?'

A group of boys and girls standing on the lowest steps answered, putting both their hands on their waists, 'Hey, golden bird, the water comes up to here.'

The lone girl standing above came down one step. She asked again, 'Hey, fish, how deep is the water?' The girl, who was playing the part of the golden bird, like a poet reciting couplets, kept repeating her question after descending each step. Meanwhile at the bottom, the boys and girls who were playing the fish gave the required answer to the question by placing their hands respectively on their ribs, stomachs, waists, thighs, knees, etc., to indicate the rising level of water.

All this noise did not please Padmanand. He turned away and looked with his dim eyesight at the river Ganges. He saw large waves pounding in the river and boats tossing around. The strong gusts of wind on his loose skin reminded him of the *Burva Mangal Mela*, when all the boats were tied to one another. At that time, he remembered, not even a year had passed since his father's death. His own boat had attracted the most attention in the procession, except for those of the Maharajah of Kashi and the Rajah of Vijaynagaram. Then again, a crisp gust of wind came and Padmanand, seated on the shore, got wet. The wave was not just a wave of the Ganges, it was also a swell in the ocean of his memory. The description of the Burva Mangel Mela, which had been printed in a monthly publication of Bharatendu Harischandra, came into his mumbling mouth. Because he quoted that description every day for three straight years, it was etched in his heart forever. He started to recite:

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'In the last Burva Mangal, something unprecedented and memorable happened. It was on Friday, the day of the festival, when the wind was blowing at such a speed that it dispersed the procession of boats, making it impossible for them to reach Ramnagar. The yacht of the Maharajah of Vijaynagaram was stuck on this side of the river. But when the Maharajah of Kashi saw that the splendid yachts were not able to move forward, he summoned his elephants. As soon as the command was given, the greatest elephants—swaying together—went into the Ganges. Some pulled with their tusks. Some butted with their heads. Some pushed with their rumps, and some grabbed the side of the yachts and pulled with their trunks. You had to see this spectacle to really appreciate it; words are not adequate to describe it.'

Pundit Padmanand's mind started to bob in the excitement of his memories. His poverty had kept him in a partial fast for several months. His immoral youth had created awful problems for his weak old age; but even today his eternally youthful heart was longing for the old, colorful ways. The fire of hunger in his stomach increased the sparks dancing before his eyes. Taking refuge in the Ganges's waters to extinguish the flame, he struggled to drink a few handfuls of water. His stomach suddenly cramped and he sat down to rest, pained.

'Fish, fish, how deep is the water?' received the customary answer: 'Golden Bird, the water is this deep.' And the girl, with a thud, jumped down to the bottom step. The boys and girls in the role of fish gathered around the newly arrived golden bird. At first the golden bird, pretending to flap her wings, moved her arms quickly, but then, abandoning the effort to escape, her arms fell slack.

On the stone steps, Pundit Padmanand died.

Frantically looking for him like someone crazed, Sonamati arrived at the ghat. Bystanders had gathered around. One asked, 'Is he dead or what? Why isn't he getting up?'

Sonamati was just about to answer when from some distant boat, a singer, unaware of this incident, sang out, 'The drowsiness of Chait dulls the spirit, Oh Ram!'

—Translated by Paul R. Golding, with Virendra Singh

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RECENT SCHOLARSHIP

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The Bengal Steam Department's Hindus and Muslims

Henry T. Bernstein

Fortunate it was that the Ganges Valley villages were teeming with men whose skills in their own traditional technology were roughly similar to those needed to keep a steam flotilla in service. Tribal people hunting animals, gathering roots and berries, and practising a shifting cultivation in the jungly hills were not nearly as well prepared by their cultural evolution to provide manpower for enterprises based on modern technology. But in settled villages on the plains and along the river banks, there were to be found castes of blacksmiths, artisans in copper and tin, carpenters, sailors, and fisherfolk. Nor was it difficult to find among them men willing to work for the Company's Government. Most of the peasants were content to remain on their lands. However, many of them sorely needed to supplement their family's earnings. Lancashire mill-made cloth and Birmingham metalware were just beginning to flood the *mofussil* bazaars, underselling village-made goods. An end to the slaughter and turmoil of ancient warfare and a beginning of modern medical intervention were reducing the customary high epidemic death rate. In the absence of any countervailing interference with the high natural birth rate, the effects of British Rule were leading to an increase in the number of people who lived off the land. As population further increased on a slowly expanding area of arable, cultivated land, fresh unemployed family members added to the traditional under-employed of the village, sharpening a new edge on age-old poverty. Men travelled long distances from the interior down to Calcutta on the chance that they might find work with the *angrezi sahibs* (English masters). Villagers needed the money and were pleased with the honour of being in government employ.

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On one point the majority of Indians in search of jobs differed markedly from Irish, Scots, Welsh, and English youths who left their countryside homes to work in Manchester and Birmingham factories. In contrast to the British country lad, an orthodox Hindu was unable to put his hands to just any task. Tradition forbade him many, and allowed him but few. Under the Hindu *jajmani* system, each member of the village brotherhood performed the hereditary work of his own caste, serving a number of patron families or the village as a whole. Hindu *dharma* (religious law) enjoined each man to labour in the calling of his fathers. By patiently carrying out the duties of his own caste, a Hindu could hope to be reborn into a higher caste in the cycle of *samsara* (the worldly wheel of rebirth). The punishment for usurping the function of other men was to 'lose caste', to be excommunicated from the wider family on whom a villager's entire daily life depended. The occupational side of caste was an integral part of a conservative harmony of life, evolved over the centuries on crowded, fertile plains open to wave after wave of invaders, where economic interdependence helped the community to survive the challenges of nature as well as the onslaughts of man. Islam, introduced to India by pastoral nomad warriors from Arabia and Central Asia, did not hold its followers to a caste occupational code, but in organizing every aspect of life in accordance with the *Qūran*, raised other barriers to the penetration of unorthodox ideas and modern practices.

As the British set about establishing the East India Company's hospitals, mints, public works departments, and survey organizations, they found that the simplest and most effective way of getting skilled and unskilled Indians to work together in harmony was to recruit men—among the Hindus at least—according to the special function of their own castes. Perhaps a job that could be done in Europe by a single person would have to be parcelled out among men from several castes. The same man who compounded medicines in the apothecary's shop would not be able to wash out the pots and utensils. Two different men would have to carry the surveyor's chain and his sighting staff. But local labour was plentiful and, by European standards, very cheap. For such duties as the Hindus would not undertake, Muslims could be engaged. Wherever an occupational function was new and unforeseen by the Hindu caste system, someone from an analogous occupation could be trained to do the job. Although there was normally no individual mobility within the caste system, castes as a whole were always striving to improve their relative position in the hierarchy. As had happened in the past it was always possible for new castes to emerge around new occupational functions. Though Hindus

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outnumbered Muslims almost everywhere in the Ganges Valley except in the deltaic area of east Bengal, during the period the British were introducing steamboats Muslims seemed to have outnumbered the Hindus in government technical employment. Muslims were more free to take up the manual labour attached to new enterprises opened up by the introduction of Europe's modern technology. Muslims were not only more flexible in work, but were also closer to the ear of British *Raj* in obtaining employment, having been the previous ruling community over most of north India.

Long before the reign of Akbar, there were experienced boatmen and sailors on India's rivers and coasts, men who knew currents and tides, the depths of channels, the nature of prevailing winds, were skilful swimmers and capable of undergoing hardship and fatigue. From among their descendants, the Bengal Steam Department recruited Muslim *khalassees* who put aside the long rudder oar of a *budgerow* to man a steamer's helm, and left the ropes of *panswais* for iron winches and grapnel anchors. Under a commander who was likely to be a European, and a mate and engine-driver who were often Europeans, the heavy work on a tug-boat like the *Jumna* was done by an Indian crew. A *serang* (boatswain), a *tindal* (petty officer), four *seaconnies* (steersmen), ten *lascars* (deckhands), six stokers, and a few other hands like a *bhandary* (storekeeper-steward), a cook, a *topass* (armed guard) and a servant made up the complement of 27 men aboard a 125-foot steamer. The accommodation boat in tow was manned by a European commander-purveyor and his mate, a clerk, a carpenter, one *tindal*, four *seaconnies,* twelve *lascars,* two *topasses,* a cook, two *bhandaries,* and two *bhandary's* mates. Among the *lascars* were such men as Mundheer Classy who said he had served with the Company for fifteen years until, alas, in 1837, when on a trip to Allahabad in the *Jellinghee* he was taken with smallpox fever and 'the sore eyes'. Unable to work any longer, he was discharged blind. 'O' how miserable the consequence of such a loss, that it entirely deprived your petitioner from all manner of worldly employments and darkened the whole system while existence lasting.' But notwithstanding the petition's flowery prose, purchased for a few coppers from a professional scribe, Mundheer's prayer to join Paunnaoolla Classy and Kaumoo Serang and others on the Company's pension establishment was turned down. The Marine Board thought that no degree of labour or exposure on board their boats would bring on smallpox, to which the surgeon in charge of the Calcutta Eye Dispensary attributed Mundheer's blindness.

At the Steam Department workshop, village *barhais* (carpenters) and *lohars* (blacksmiths) were taken on as artificers in teakwood, iron, brass, copper, lead

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and tin. Under European supervision, men skilled in working metal with simple tools were put to punching iron plates, casting rivets, countersinking rivet holes, fashioning bumpkin irons, hatch bars, knee bolts, axle trees, capstan hooks, marline spikes, and hundreds of other steamboat parts. At the bellows and forges they made hoops and hinges, shackles, brass bushes, and chain links. Their skilled, sensitive hands patiently filed away at pins, rings, and screws, and drilled angle-irons at the vice-bench. Controller Johnston took some pride in writing home: 'We have excellent Smiths, Braziers, and most accurate fitters and very clever Casters. The pattern-makers are generally Chinamen....' At one time, he planned not to give Indian stokers on the tugs their full pay until, by learning to pack engines and work at the lathe as well, they would become 'double-handed' men. It was hoped that within two or three years every fireman would be an artificer and each steamboat would have among its crew men capable of performing small repairs.

The Steam Department's shore-side artificers—145 during an average month in 1837—were, from Controller Johnston's point of view, men inured to poverty. Their wants were few and their wages enabled them to live at their accustomed standard, usually on the side of the water opposite Calcutta, at a distance of five to seven miles from Kidderpore. They visited their families back home in far-off villages every year about the time of the *Durgah Pujah* festival, when for this purpose they left work for a month, six weeks, or two months at a time. Even at other times of the year it did not take much to keep the Indians away from their jobs. A Hindu or Muslim holiday, a wedding or funeral, or a heavy rain prevented their attendance at the Kidderpore yards, and was the cause of much uncertainty and inconvenience in completing any work. From the outset, the Controller was determined to change 'these habits of the natives so opposed to the regularity desirable in a Factory'. To do this, he had to alter the customary system of hiring labour.

In Bengal it was usual for carpenters and caulkers, braziers and painters, joiners and sawyers, to engage themselves in teams or 'sets'. A 'mistry' (master craftsman) received wages for himself and several helpers whom he paid as he saw fit, changing his men as occasion or convenience might serve his interests. This had something of the characteristics of a feudal arrangement. On setting up the steam establishment, Johnston began to introduce modern western institutional forms by engaging men individually to the department. He stipulated that they should muster every morning at six, and work until half-past two, hours dictated by the Indian sun. To discourage absenteeism, he established a rather ingenious system of money inducements. After recognizing

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fifteen Hindu holidays in the circle of the year, Johnston required that with the exception of these and the Christian sabbath, every man should muster the remaining days of the month at the appointed hour. If he did not miss a day he would be paid for all the unworked Sundays as well. But if, in the course of the month, there was one lapse, the whole benefit was forfeited and pay given only for the days actually worked. If the absences from muster exceeded five days in the month, a reduction of the daily wage was the punishment inflicted, unless satisfactory cause could be shown. It was optional with the offending party to submit to this punishment or take the whole amount of wages due, accompanied with his dismissal.

It was easier to impose the labour discipline of Maudslay's foundry on the artisans assembled at the Steam Department workshop than to enforce the same regularity on a long straggling line of Indian pilots stationed up and down eight hundred miles of river. The compulsions of 'duty' and punctuality could be counted on to weigh more heavily on highly-paid Europeans in the government than on poor villagers like thirty-eight year old Toofany, 'a professional native pilot', stationed at Patna, who guided steamers between the entrance of the Gogra at Revelganj as far up as Luchmeepore. He had been recruited for this part-time job by the District Magistrate, and was entirely responsible for providing his own rowboat and crew. His steersman was Ramdial, forty-five, a brother of Buckoo, a deceased pilot under whom Toofany had once served as *manjhee.* At the oars was one of Buckoo's sons, a twenty-two year old boy named Mohun. The second *dandee* was Jungoo, who gave his age as forty-five. The Magistrate, however, dealt only with the pilot, who paid the other men's wages in the traditional way. This compromise with feudalism was a system more lax than Controller Johnston's at Kidderpore, and left the way open for disappointments when it came to efficiency.

The pilots were generally found very helpful on the *Lord William Bentinck's* first trip upwards (August to September 1834), except for one man condemned as 'quite useless' (from an excess of drink, the captain suspected). On subsequent trips there were many more complaints. Some of the pilots were said to hardly know their divisions, not having been over the whole extent in a long time. It was suggested that the stretches of river for which they were responsible were too long. Some were from 45 to 60 miles. At a Fort William desk that may have seemed a logical enough distance on Captain Prinsep's chart of the Ganges, but out on the river it meant gruelling work to sail, row, and track up and down, learning the constantly changing depths and positions of the channels and the shifting location of shoals and other obstructions; and

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then always to be ready to take the helm of the weekly or bi-weekly steamer, all in addition to earning the rest of one's meagre living piloting country-boats.

How different this was from the life of a pilot on the Mississippi in Mark Twain's youth! Mississippi pilots were highly respected, well-paid professionals, who memorized a thousand miles of river as it appeared when travelling upstream and downstream, by night as well as by day. Custom permitted them to ride free in the wheelhouse of any steamboat to keep abreast of the river's continual changes. Indian pilots on the Ganges enjoyed no such advantages. They were poorly paid and looked upon as 'natives'. There was no constant traffic of steamboats on which they could have travelled, to keep up their knowledge of the river. If a shoal place had to be sounded, they had to row to it over many miles of river. Instead of the expert specialist, the government of Bengal relied on a string of local river men, engaged part-time, to cover as much territory for as little pay as possible. However, after a year of experience, even the Controller of Government Steam Vessels had to admit that 'fifty miles is a greater distance upon the Ganges than one pilot can maintain a competent knowledge of' and that the initial wages offered were too low to induce good men to serve. In setting up an establishment of personnel he reasoned one always had to take care not to impose a 'heavier duty than can be effectually performed without greater exertion and labour than from the known habits of the Natives may reasonably be expected' because in their eagerness for a government job, 'the people we employ will of course never hesitate to undertake how much soever they afterwards fail to perform.' The authorities were brought to realize that the expense of really efficient pilotage would more than be covered by the saving on injuries to boats, loss of time, and consumption of extra coal caused by groundings.

Even after the pilots' divisions were reduced to twenty-five and thirty miles, the establishment worked in an erratic fashion. It exasperated the *Megna's* commander sufficiently for him to report on '...the shameful conduct of the Pilots. At several stations they were not to be found, nor were their *manjhees* in attendance. The consequence was, I frequently was obliged to be without a Pilot and where the river was difficult to navigate I employed boat people to shew me the channels. The Pilots are perfectly useless, they neither know their duty nor do they know the channels owing to which they frequently work us aground.' From London, the Court of Directors suggested it was a mistake to have taken them into regular employ. Might not their services be obtained as readily and more efficiently by the offer of adequate remuneration for each occasion, rather than steady wages? Indeed, boatmen had mentioned

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to Captain Johnston in 1828 that at narrow places on the smaller rivers and creeks, pilots waited for country craft and having conducted them safely were rewarded with a few handfuls of rice!

Rather than go back to a feudal system, the Bengal Government devised a new institutional control to keep pilots up to the mark. Each was given a book in which steamer commanders were to enter a remark when satisfactorily piloted; or when not, a protest and a request to the district officer to cut the pilot's pay. The Magistrate at Mirzapur, Mr H.W. Woodcock, with a fine feeling for justice such as sweetened much in British rule, adopted the practice of crediting lines to a fund for paying rewards to pilots expressly commended for their good conduct. However, as the district officers frequently had more urgent duties to perform, by the pilots' confession their pay was rarely cut. Lapses often went unpunished. One Hurdial had a particularly notorious record, grounding the *Jumna* whenever he set foot aboard. On one trip he caused a detention of 9 hours, and next day another of 2 hours and 20 minutes, followed in short order by an error of piloting that detained the steamer 4 hours more. Commander G.W. Phillips would have written copiously in the complaint book but Hurdial failed to produce it! Considering him perfectly useless, Phillips finally wrote directly to the Collector of Ghazipur, and Hurdial was removed from the roll. For every one like him, how many others diligently and skilfully steered the steamers past the river's perils throughout a lifetime of faithful but unsung service?

Indians were known to have certain work habits well adapted to the timelessness of village life, which were ill suited to fast-moving operations of a modern-technical nature, where efficiency depended on each employee performing accurately his functions at the scheduled time and place. Moreover, what was a virtue in the intimate daily life of the village did not always conduce to the efficient running of boats. Many customs and caste restrictions positively hampered the operations of the steamer service. Controller Johnston often enough expressed his regret that 'amongst the working Mechanics, Religion and Caste are strictly observed.' Most of the smiths, vice-men, braziers and casters were Hindus. For one thing, caste restrictions regarding meals prevented them from serving on board the steamboats, where a few such hands would have rendered the engine room establishment more efficient at small cost. Johnston's efforts in another direction to bring forward Muslim artificers (possibly the 'double-handed' stokers to which he referred) were not attended in the beginning with much success. It was not so easy to change the cultural heritage of centuries. One had to cope with what in those days the British impatiently called 'the prejudice of the Hindoos'.

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A few examples may illustrate what the Steam Department's organizers had to contend with. One of the long-standing hazards of navigation were tree trunks obstructing the river channel. After Mr Wiseham's party had been sent to sweep the channels in 1833–34, it was seen that it would be better to prevent trees from falling into the water by removing them whenever signs appeared that the banks were in danger of slipping. It could be foreseen, however, that Hindus might object to the auspicious *peepul* tree being cut down under any circumstances, especially on the banks of the holy *Ganga*. The Bengal Government, however, felt it would be 'a weakness to yield to their objections at the risk of the lives and property of those who navigate the river'. It was a matter of what one considered the greater danger. To the villagers, it was more perilous to disturb the abode of Brahma, Vishnu, and Siva (the principal deities of the Hindu pantheon). With an imagination filled with entirely different visions, British officials saw in those trees only the phantom of the *Berhampooter* wreck.

Every Englishman who went out to India soon learned that Hindus observed strict conditions when taking food and drink. Each caste had its rules. Emily Eden noticed, on her steamer voyage up the country, that her Hindu servants always had to go ashore because their customs prohibited cooking food on board a boat. Nothing but dried peas or flour would Hindus touch unless they could find a bit of ground on which each could light his own fire and in his own pot prepare a simple meal of *dal* (a pulse) and rice, sometimes fried in *ghee* (clarified butter) and spiced with salt, turmeric, and chillies. Muslims, and certain Hindu castes of low respectability, might be persuaded to eat from a common galley, provided a high-caste Brahmin did the cooking, but most Hindu *sipahis* who in the early years were assigned to treasure escort duty had to wait until the steamer put to for the night. Then they went ashore and had their meal in solitude, unpolluted and undefiled. Their officers had to think of such things as providing a special supply of drinking water on the journey. Usually one of the iron tanks on board was assigned for the exclusive use of the Hindu troops, who would not take water touched by men of lower castes. A lieutenant of the 26th Regiment Native Infantry could recall an instance when, by express order of the officer commanding the sepoys, a tank was filled for their use and a sentry placed over it, but not a drop would they drink although at one time it was believed they were nearly dying of thirst. They insisted on having their water kept in a new wooden cask, rather than in an old tank made of iron.

To keep the river boats from losing valuable daylight time while halting for Hindus to cook, Sir Charles Metcalfe in 1834 ordered that henceforth

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escorts be composed entirely of Muslim soldiers. By 1840, a corps of between forty and sixty marine *sipahis* under four *havildars* (Indian sergeants) was raised especially for guarding the steamers. They were recruited from a class of soldiers already employed on ships in the China trade. Some had served in the flotilla that fought on the Arakan coast during the Burmese war. Armed with musket and bayonet, when not embarked they mounted guard at the Kidderpore dockyard and foundry.

There may have been some measure of hygienic wisdom in caste customs relating to food and drink, for people sometimes do the right things for the wrong reasons. But not knowing the right reasons, they fall into extremes. Mere physical proximity of certain low-caste groups was considered polluting by most upper-caste Hindus. In an Indian village, privacy was an almost unknown experience. Yet, over the ages, people had developed many ingenious techniques for living in a crowd. A delicate sense of public decorum was part of the upbringing of members of the different castes who went about the village doing their work, but keeping their separate ways. On the closely-packed decks of a river steamer, the whole system would have been thrown into confusion. This was a consideration that naturally came to mind when it was suggested in 1835 that government steamers be used to transport the Calcutta office staff of the accountant-general. They were being sent up to cope with the new revenue settlement in the North-West Provinces. Ordinarily, 130 Indians, of different ranks, with their families and servants, would have gone in a long procession of individual *budgerows* and smaller country craft; but as the iron flotilla had just come into service someone suggested sending the party up to Allahabad by steamer. Controller Johnston feared, however, that with the best arrangements it would be difficult to reconcile people of so many castes, with high Brahmins among them, to a manner of travelling that would subject them frequently to contact and neighbourhood offensive to their religious customs.

There may have been some additional, unexpressed reasons for not wanting to take on so large a group. For on other occasions the British were beginning to show less solicitude for the sanctity of caste. They had at first reconciled themselves to work within the framework of a system which, although strange to them and often inconvenient, they had little hope of altering. The attempt to interfere with caste customs promised only to lead to trouble. On the other hand, the very presence of Europeans and their activities in India began to exert an influence by example. Lord Bentinck's was an administration which opened an era of more active efforts at social reform. His campaigns

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against *suttee* (widow immolation), *thuggee* (strangling travellers in the name of the Goddess Kali), *meriah* human sacrifice among the Khond tribes, and female infanticide, represented an advance wave of a humanitarian and missionary tide that was to sweep India.

At the beginning of the nineteenth century, the 'evangelicals' at East India House in London, and among the Company's servants in Bengal, began to feel it too heavy a burden on their conscience to continue the policy of not interfering with what they held to be pagan customs sanctioned by heathen religions. Once the break was made with the policy of respect and non-interference, the British tended to ignore traditional customs when, in connection with some new element of modern technology, it was inconvenient to observe and practical to circumvent them. In the case of the famous pork-greased cartridges of 1857, though they were not the main cause of the Bengal Army Mutiny, ignoring Muslim feelings turned out to be extremely impractical. As far as the Hindus and Muslims working for the Steam Department down to 1840 were concerned, the limited records available do not permit identifying in detail such changes in caste customs as may have taken place. The first decade was probably too short a period for any startling developments to have taken place.

Given the general conditions of Indian life and traditions, it would be interesting to consider how well the local people did in their new technical jobs. A judgement common among the British was one expressed by Major-General George Borlase Tremenheere, whose engineering experience in the Bengal Presidency began a year before the first steam voyage on the Ganges. In his view, Indian 'mechanics' (by which he must have meant artisans) and 'farm-labourers' (peasants) were not surpassed anywhere in manual dexterity, general intelligence, perseverance, and frugal habits. But he felt that a 'spirit of energy, enterprise, and well-instructed skill' did not form part of their character. An English mechanical engineer who studied steam transportation problems in Bengal in the 1840s attributed the fact that on a falling river Indian boatmen sometimes allowed their grounded boats to remain high and dry until the following monsoon, to 'the want of energy of the native character'. On the other hand, the Marquess of Hastings, watching Bengal *dandees* at work on country boats, had observed that 'the poor fellows show much exertion when they wish to effect anything.'

There are always words that can be said in praise, and others in criticism, but probably the question whether Indians made 'good' technical personnel can no more be given a general and ultimate answer than whether Europeans were good organizers, trainers, and supervisors. One can, however, identify

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difficult conditions, psychological as well as physical, which individuals had to overcome before they could work efficiently as technical personnel.

Anyone at Allahabad in 1840 who saw the way a party of Indian 'coolies' were unloading from a steamer several chests containing 'musquets bore Fuzil' consigned to the arsenal, might have made a remark about some people's lack of 'technical sense'. 693 guns out of 800 were damaged because the stevedores were flip-flopping the wooden chests end over end. The commander of the *Matabanga,* who was of course familiar with the nature of carefully-machined metal objects, when he saw what was taking place, soon put a stop to the rough handling. But how were the Indian workmen supposed to know the consequences of what they were doing? No one had ever taught them how to read the labels on the boxes. And even if they could have known their contents, they had never handled anything like a 'musquet'. Besides, the way they were wrestling with those crates was probably as efficient a way as any to move heavy objects with nothing but one's hands. They were just doing what came naturally, making the job as easy as possible. Within the framework of their own indigenous technology they were efficient. But it is also understandable that a man brought up in Europe at the outset of the industrial revolution, although he had no responsibility for freight after it left the sides of his vessel, should wince at the way those chests were being mishandled. The care of delicate equipment was part of the 'technical sense' a European was likely to acquire in the course of childhood training. But there was little in an Indian village upbringing to prepare men for adapting, without further training, to a whole range of requirements in applying modern technology. However, when that training became available later in the nineteenth century, Indians showed themselves second to none in being able to profit thereby.

Villagers also had to face the physical obstacles of Bengal's difficult natural environment in which poverty was the overriding fact of life. One of the most common forms of poverty was malnutrition. It may have been lack of sufficient food, or absence of a well-balanced diet, or it may have been disease attacking a body low in resistance, that caused someone to report that Summad Alley, a 'native' sent on board the *Hoogly* in 1834 as assistant engineer, was of no use during the voyage, 'not even for stopping and starting the Engines, for which he has not sufficient Physical strength…' The Controller of Government Steam Vessels early had to abandon the ideal of introducing the Mississippian practice of poling boats over shallows because he found the *lascars* wanting in strength to manage the poles effectively. Pushing steamboats

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around is not something that can be done by bodies nourished on a little parched grain or boiled rice and chillies. In general the rice, fish and vegetable-eating peasants of deltaic Bengal, and the wheat and vegetable-eaters of the Gangetic plains gave the appearance of being less sturdy than the meat-eating Sikhs of the Punjab, the *paharis* (hill men) of the north, and the *pathans* of the North-West Frontier. The British, who classified the Indians as either martial or non-martial races, for example, used not to recruit soldiers from among the Bengalis.

What individual Indians lacked in physical strength was made up by the large numbers available for employment. When a steamer grounded, the officers used to send to the nearest Magistrate, Collector, or village *darogah* for a few hundred 'coolies' with shovels, baskets, and mattocks. Elephants were occasionally brought down to the river to help drag boats back into the water, but massed human labour was much more common. At the *Lord William Bentinck's* relaunching near Barh, the superintending engineer noticed that the workers were not so active or willing as some he had seen in action on a previous operation at Revelganj. They appeared to be nearly starved as a result of poor harvests due to floods following in the wake of a year of failing monsoon rains. Captain Russell of the steamer allowed each man at twelve o'clock '1 pound of *sutto* (parched gram, ground to flour, usually eaten as a paste mixed with peas and water) and a little salt', and noted, 'it is surprising how much this little sustenance expedites our operations.' The *suttoo* was discontinued after a fortnight. Mr Russell reported to Calcutta, '... at first we were obliged to supply the coolies with food to encourage them to stop [i.e. stay and work], but I now do so no longer, in consequence [of] being able to procure men without.' 18 'saws' earning six annas each per day, 32 carpenters at four annas, and 126 coolies (one rupee to be divided among fourteen of them) were expected to provide for themselves and their families out of their daily wages. Of villagers in a similar situation further down the river, Emily Eden had written just the year before that 'the quantity of rice for which they usually gave one rupee now costs three, and the fish in the tanks are all dead, and as most of them earn about five rupees a month and live entirely on rice and fish, they are in great distress and dying very much of cholera.' But these were exceptionally hard times. Not every year brought a famine.

Indians quite naturally preferred a fixed monthly wage to being paid on *thika* (by the day on contract basis) for uncertain periods. Neither the one system nor the other was traditional in the village. There, artisans received no money wages but were paid in kind out of the harvest, as servants of the village

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community. But once the British introduced money economy in everything with which they were connected, Indians took to the greater security of regular pay. A case in point is Ramtuhull Mistry, a worker in iron and wood, who sometimes was called to do emergency repairs on steamboats passing Dinapore, and earned for his family eight annas a day when so employed. Eventually, he made an application for a definite monthly allowance instead. As far as he was concerned, the inadequacy of the remuneration came not from its low rate—that was customary and accepted—but from its uncertainty. For, if there were no steamboat jobs to perform he sometimes had to find work outside the station; and when his services were needed there, no time was to be lost. The Steam Department, on the other hand, in the interests of economy always preferred to pay part-time wages where duties like emergency repairs were considered too trifling to engage a full-time man. So Ramtuhull was advised to decline unprofitable Steam Department employment, which, as Controller Johnston added, no one compelled him to perform. With so many willing to do the work, government could afford to harden their hearts to the necessities of individuals.

On the other hand, in the interests of efficiency, government learned to provide money incentives for extra exertions. This was the principle of the *batta* (extra pay) a soldier received when taking the field in military campaigns. In a poor feudal society there is little 'public spirit' or feeling of obligation beyond the bounds of family and caste. Where the uniting influence of citizenship and a national ideal had not yet developed, where duty was conceived of as the personal loyalty of servant to master and subject to ruler, manipulations of pay served as strong incentives and as checks to ensure that the duties laid down by the impersonal governmental regulations were carried out even when the masters and rulers were not present. Something was needed to keep men to their duty. The threat of cutting delinquent pilots' pay and mulcting disobedient *lascars*' wages, and the offer of full pay to 'double-handed' stokers, or *batta* to *lascars* who would shoulder a musquet, was the means employed in the early nineteenth century. The same system of reward was used to motivate European steam engineers to keep their machinery in good order. They were paid more for the time they worked while on a voyage, than when waiting ashore for the completion of repairs to the engines.

The Indians' wages were extremely low by contemporary European standards, even if that was the usual level. So economical was Indian muscle-power that at one point it threatened to forestall the introduction

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of steam-power. In the heyday of steamboat experiments, the Bengal Government sanctioned funds to a certain Lt-Col. Galloway for constructing a boat equipped with man-powered paddle-wheel machinery. In 1827, he built a craft intended for river service, capable of carrying a hundred persons. It was tried on the water against a vessel of equal size propelled by common oars. Fortunately for the future of steam navigation in India, Galloway's galley was worsted in the competition. On the other hand, the cost of European labour was almost as great a hurdle, for the opposite reason. High wages demanded by European engineers were among the circumstances militating the most against steam navigation in Bengal, as Captain Johnston pointed out to Lord Bentinck in 1828. The availability of low-paid Indians for all but the few special technical jobs was somewhat of a compensation.

That the pay of the various men who worked in the department should translate their social standing, if not their skill and energy, into rupees and annas, was a point implicit in the advice Captain Johnston gave to the Directors in 1833, when he recommended that 'The Wages and Salaries throughout the Service should be adapted to the respectable maintenance of the [men] employed in the various grades of Society to which their occupations and duties may fix them as properly belonging...' On an iron Ganges steamer, the scale in 1837 was as follows:

	Company's Rupees per month
commander (varying allowances in addition to fixed salary) ..	Rs 285 (estimate)
mate	Rs 70
serang	Rs 20
tindal	Rs 14
seaconnies	Rs 14
lascars	Rs 8
stokers	Rs 16
carpenter	Rs 20
bhandary	Rs 8
cook	Rs 12
topass	Rs 10
servant	Rs 8

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The payroll for an accommodation boat crew was similar:

	Company's Rupees per month
commander-purveyor	Rs 220
mate	Rs 50
carpenter	Rs 20
serang	Rs 14
seaconnies	Rs 14
lascars	Rs 8
topass	Rs 10
cook	Rs 12
bhandary	Rs 8

Europeans always earned more than the Eurasians, and Eurasians more than the Hindus and Muslims. Skilled labour among the Indians was usually more highly rewarded than unskilled, except in the case of the stokers. The terrible heat which they had to endure made it necessary to offer wages twice those of the deckhands, in order to get men to take such disagreeable work.

In the course of the first few years, European pay somewhat improved. Mr Wiseham, commanding the *Lord William Bentinck* in 1834, could only count on a fixed wage of Rs 160 which, with an allowance of Rs 2 per day when proceeding to the Western Provinces, usually came to Rs 200 a month. By 1839, steamboat commander salaries after five years of service were fixed at Rs 300, and for less than five years' service, at Rs 250. A mate who was paid Rs 50 plus rations five years before, now earned Rs 80, Rs 100 or Rs 125, depending on his years with the department. But there was not more than one rupee's increase in the pay of the Indians, except that when armed and trained to man guns to protect treasure, a *serang* was paid an additional Rs 3 per month, and each petty officer and *lascar* got an additional rupee.

The pay of the Indian artificers at the Kidderpore Yard was comparable to that of the boat crews:

	Rupees per month of 30 days
joiner mistries	Rs 12
joiner mistries' men	Rs 8
carpenter mistries	Rs 10

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carpenter mistries' men	..	..	..	Rs 6, 8 as.
caulker mistries	..	..	..	Rs 6
caulker mistries' men	..	..	..	Rs 5
painter mistries	..	..	..	Rs 10
painter mistries' men	..	..	..	Rs 7
coolies	..	..	..	Rs 4, 8 as.
vicemen	..	..	..	Rs 12
brazier mistries	..	..	..	Rs 16
brazier mistries' men	..	..	..	Rs 12

'Saws, 3 men to a Set' were paid 12 as. per day.

There was little scope for upward promotion. It was not like on a Mississippi steamer of the same period, where a deckhand, striker, or steersman could rise to be a captain. A stratified society and an underdeveloped economy held villagers along the Ganges in bonds as tight as laws that bound Negroes in America before 1860, and serfs in Tsarist Russia before the Emancipation of 1866. But the advent of occupations utilizing modern technology, as they interfered with caste and promoted the creation of new wealth making higher earnings possible, foreshadowed a brighter future for poor men. In May 1840, one of the Bengal Government's sea-going steamers happened to be at Singapore when Mr Bartlett, a good, steady 'East Indian' engine-driver (Rs 125 per month) took leave to return to Calcutta on private business. One of the Indian stokers in the engine room, Sumsair by name, recommended as 'perfectly competent to perform the duties of Engine Driver', took over. His salary was, however, raised from Rs 17 to only Rs 30.

On the whole, the Indians who served the Bengal Steam Department were useful and creditable technical personnel, considering the adverse conditions under which they had to work. The suffering they endured was extreme, but not altogether unrelieved by pleasures and contentment. Their lives were, for the most part, short and full of pain, so that the efforts they expended under such circumstances were laudable in the extreme. If the records usually mention the pilots, *lascars,* and artisans only to complain about one or another dereliction of duty, vast pages of silence testify to unheralded but nonetheless noteworthy achievements. For one thing, steamboats would not have turned a paddle on the Ganges without Hindus and Muslims to do the heavy work.

One other contribution Indians made to the movement of steamers was through the trade in coal. Stokers would not have had any to shovel into the

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furnaces had not depot *sircars* like Jodonauth Mookerjee at Rajmahal braved the wrath of steamer commanders, and Hulladhur Mookerjee at Banaras that of petty bazaar tradesmen who set up their shops so close to his stockpile that 'much coal are dusted and lost by the Footsteps of them and their people'. The *sircars* were agents for contractors, usually European merchants. However, a founding partner of Carr, Tagore and Co. (the department's leading coal supplier in 1836) was a prominent Bengali Hindu.

The family of Dwarkanath Tagore (1795?–1846) probably belonged to a Hindu Brahmin landlord caste. He could trace his ancestry to one Jayram who served the Company as an *ameen* (local revenue official) after the battle of Plassey (1757) and whose son (Dwarkanath's grandfather) rose from a subordinate post in a *zillah* (district) court to *sheristadar* (an official), the highest government rank an Indian could then hold. Dwarkanath was brought up by an uncle who had no sons but a lot of land and many villages for which he was the *zamindar*. Each year, he paid an agreed sum to the Company's treasury as tax for a tract of land from whose peasants his bailiffs extracted enough besides to support him and his family in a *pukka* mansion in Calcutta, where he could devote his time to religious and cultural pursuits. At home, Dwarkanath received a Bengali religious upbringing and at the *pathsala* (Hindu primary school) he was taught to count and write. Later he was sent to learn English at Mr Sherburne's school in the Chitpore Road, Calcutta. Such volumes as *Enfield's Spelling, Universal Letter Writer*, and *Royal English Grammar* opened the gate to European knowledge. Down this path he was taken by the Rev. William Adams, and by J.G. Gordon and James Calder, partners in the leading agency house Mackintosh and Co. From the lips of the great *zamindar* Ram Mohan Roy, he heard modern liberal ideas and reformed religious beliefs. By giving up orthodox ritualistic Hinduism for a more spiritualized concept and worship of God, he took part in that Hindu Reformation of the early nineteenth century which among other things made way for a distinction between religious and secular knowledge, opening the way to absorbing the influence of European thought.

Dwarkanath lost his uncle at an early age, and so began to manage large inherited *zamindari* lands. A *zamindar* had to acquire all sorts of intricate legal knowledge about various types of tenure rights. Government regulations fixed the obligations of cultivating tenants and the tax collector's interests. If a dispute arose, peasant and *zamindar* went to a British-established civil court where, in those days, over two-thirds of the cases adjudicated arose from rival claims to land. Dwarkanath put his own experience to use in representing

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others. Once, when he had to go to court at a town up the Hooghly river, he hired the steamer *Irrawaddy* for the day.

As an active young *zamindar,* exporting silk and indigo as well, he was exceptional in not being content merely to collect his rents and sink into a purposeless, idle existence. His many-sided activities earned him a position of influence among his Bengali friends and also in European circles. For a few years he worked in the Company's administration under the Salt Agent and Collector of the Twenty-Four Pargannas, and for the Board of Customs, Salt, and Opium, but resigned in 1834 to devote himself to private business in Calcutta. Around that time, he founded in partnership with a few Englishmen (among them an assistant surgeon) the firm of Carr, Tagore and Co. He was one of the first Bengalis to set up a house of business on the European model. The commercial aspirations of most Hindu merchants went no further than to serve as *banias* to European firms, supplying funds, carrying out purchasing and selling commissions, and pocketing a fee. 'It never entered into their heads to launch into speculations or make shipments on their own account.' But Dwarkanath, through his association with the European mercantile community, had learned the commercial techniques and organization of the European bourgeoisie. His firm invested in indigo factories at Selaidah and other places, bought the Commercolly silk manufactory, operated a sugar factory at Ramnuggeer, and worked several coal mines. These collieries supplied fuel for the Ganges steamers for several years.

One of Tagore's Bengali colleagues was Mutty Lall Seal (1791–1854). His father was a cloth merchant in Calcutta's China Bazar. After a vernacular education at the *pathsala*, he attended an English elementary school kept by a Eurasian gentleman. Having lost his father at an early age, and inherited 'a moderate pittance', he fell into bad company and picked up idle and extravagant habits. At seventeen, a self-appointed guardian married him to a child bride whose father, seeing the dissipated life that Mutty Lall was leading, took him on a long pilgrimage to upper India, around the year 1810. It took them three months on a *panswai* to get up the river to Banaras. From there they went to Brindaban in the north-west, perhaps breaking journey to have a dip at the sacred confluence at Allahabad.

His biographer writes that Mutty Lall continued to lead an idle and aimless life until he was twenty-four. About this time he made the acquaintance of some military officers stationed at Fort William, whom he supplied with stores. Later he worked as a custom's *darogah*, managed a widowed cousin's estate, made money selling empty bottles and corks, and in 1820 became a

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ship's *bania*. East Indiamen captains, allowed a certain amount of cargo space on board for their own trade goods, brought Mutty Lall imports from England to sell on commission. Then he became associated with a number of mercantile firms who profited from his prodigious detailed knowledge of the bazaar, the quality of its wares and their fluctuating prices. Later he established his own agencies in the *mofussil* to buy staples like saltpetre at Chupra, sugar at Ghazipur, silk at Rampore Beauleah, indigo and rice in the various districts in which they were grown, to be floated down to Calcutta by country boat.

Mutty Lall Seal also invested in shipping between China and Europe. At one time he owned twelve vessels of large and small tonnage, among them a steam tug, the *Banian*. He must also have taken an interest in the government river boats, because in 1810 he offered to supply iron plates and two steam engines to the committee developing a hot-weather refuge in the cool hills around Darjeeling. Mutty Lall's gift was to be used for the 'Darjeeling Bridge', a steam ferry across the Ganges between Bugwangolah and Burgotchee, to connect with a road leading from Calcutta to the hills. Captain Johnston had a look at the engines and found they would not do, so the generous *babu* offered to write to England by the next mail for engines of a proper type. There must have been other wealthy Bengalis like Mutty Lall Seal and Dwarkanath Tagore whose business interests brought them in touch with inland steam navigation in the 1830s and 1840s.

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The Ganges in Bengal

Steven G. Darian

The river of life

In Bengal, the Ganges has bequeathed her greatest legacy for good and evil. As the magic of place is by some alchemy transmuted into culture, so the river invests the literature and religion of the delta.

Ganga in poetry and song

From earliest times, Bengal has evolved a unique civilization. With its ancient stock enriched by Mongolian people from Burma and the Himalayas, as well as Aryans and other settlers from the west, and stimulated by maritime contact with other cultures, it has often overflowed the bounds of caste and other formal limitations of Hindu society. It has created a deep fusion of Hindu, Buddhist, Muslim, and indigenous folk elements.

The earliest glimpse of this fusion appears among the Siddhacharyas, medieval writers of mystic songs who were believed to have attained great spiritual powers through yoga. Similarly the Buddhist Sahajiya sect and their modern reflection the Bauls. Like the Siddhacharyas, the Bauls regard the human body as a microcosm of the universe. They have little use for ritual but seek to realize god by knowing *maner manush*, the man of the heart. So the medieval poet Saraha exclaims:

> When the mind goes to rest,
> The bonds of the body are destroyed,
> And when the flavor of the Innate pours forth,
> There is neither outcaste nor brahmin.

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Here is the sacred Jumna and here the River Ganges,
Here are Prayaga and Benares, here are Sun and Moon.
Here I have visited in my wanderings shrines
and such places of pilgrimage,
For I have not seen another shrine
blissful like my own body.[1]

Among the poets of Bengal it is natural that boats and rivers should pervade the imagery of religious understanding. In their desire to blur the distinction between opposites, the Sahajiyas often sought an outcaste woman as their partner. Dombipada sings:

The boat sails on
between the Ganges and the Jumna,
The Lady brings her children
to the other shore.
Steer my boat,
oh outcaste woman,
while time is far off in the sky.[2]

With the body as his vessel, the *sadhaka* (initiate) must steer toward the farther shore of understanding through the storms and deadly currents of his passions. The only mariner to guide him through the storm is God or Realization.[3] Bengali mystical songs such as Marfati, Murshid, and those of the Bauls, have little to do with ritual and with orthodox ceremonies. In such songs, Ganga finds a place not as something divine but as part of the simple imagery. Perhaps the greatest Baul poet was Lalan Shah (1774–1890), claimed by Hindus and Muslims alike, whose achievement soars beyond the faulted vision of denominations. 'Who knows the Lord?' he asks:

Like a small fish he is playing in the water.
He encompasses the world.
But you find him only
in the mirror of your understanding.
He swims within us,
we who are like the Ganges.

When the water dries,
the fish will fly.
Man is as deep as the Ganges.

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Only love can enter there.
Lalan says: 'I drowned to reach the depths.'[4]

The body is described as a boat. It is built of love, and the shipwright lives within it. 'Come to that boat, who is god,' sings Lalan, 'if you will cross the river. It is built with understanding and will never fail you.'[5] The initiate must immerse himself in the river of love. 'Only the diver knows the silent ecstasy of deep water. To the ignorant, the river itself cannot be seen. There, waves rise up without a wind, and that magic moment the river springs to life. In this river without banks, a great fish dwells in solitary splendor. He rises to the surface with the coming of the moon. Then is the time to seize him. Bathe in that river and your heart will lose all fear; the summons will not trouble you at all.'[6]

The great fish, an emblem of the oneness beyond words, is waiting at Triveni, literally 'the three braids,' the place where three rivers meet. 'Lay a snare to catch him at Triveni,' Lalan says.[7] The great Triveni at Prayag is mirrored by the little Triveni in Bengal near Satgaon. It is also a place of the mind, a place where all distinctions disappear. The Baul poet Phatik Chand sings:

On a river without water
a lotus blossom floats,
while gazelles leap silver,
in the moonless night.

Whoever can surmount the vortex
of Triveni,
where three rivers meet,
will float forever
on the waves of time.[8]

In Bengal, the folk gods have attained a permanent place in the tradition. By sanskritization they have become an accepted part of Hindu ritual. One of these gods is Dharma Thakur, whose worship is popular throughout the delta. In a ceremony called Vaitarani Par (Vaitarani is the river of the underworld), a pit is dug and then filled with fish and water. As a person crosses the river after death, so the worshipper is directed across the tiny pool while a priest recites verses appropriate to the ceremony.[9] A Dharma text, the *Shunya Purana,* describes the mind as a boat with Dharma himself as helmsman.

We find the same values in Ramprasad Sen (1715–1780), a devotee of Kali who was born at Halisahar, a little town on the Ganges near Calcutta. As

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with Lalan, 'the pearl of Shakti lies at the depths, in the sea of knowledge.'[10] But in his fascination with the goddess, Ramprasad rejects the boat of the body:

> The mind has freighted you across the waters,
> as a trader;
> buying, selling, gaining, losing.
> Bit by bit
> the boat is sinking.
> My mind, you have carried on your trade
> too well.[11]

Faith alone can save the devotee from the misfortunes of this world:

> The Tara boat cast its anchor
> at the landing place.
> O my mind! Come running if you want to cross.
> Set sail by Tara's grace and row it quickly,
> if you would cross the sea of suffering.[12]

To the end, Ramprasad embraced his morbid vision: 'Afloat on the ocean of Samsara,' he cries, 'I journey back and forth, back and forth.' At times, the disembodied Kali manifests herself in the image of Ganga: 'When Kali is awake, then Ganga flows in your heart.'[13] In his despair at not receiving the *darshan* of Kali (her appearance before him), Ramprasad reflects that the goddess is dead. As the co-wife of Shiva, along with Mother Kali, Ganga provides consolation for the poet:

> O mind! call 'Mother' no more.
> Where will you find her, friend?
> Had She been alive, She would have appeared
> before you; all destroying Mother is not alive.
> Let me go to stepmother Ganga's banks,
> burn Mother's effigy of Kusha grass,
> offer rice-cakes to Her departed Spirit after mourning
> and go to Kashi [Banaras].[14]

At the moment of his death, that vision came to him. It is told that on the last day of the Kali Puja, when the Ganges at Hughli was filled with boats carrying images of Kali, Ramprasad suddenly rose from his boat. He began to sing of the goddess, and falling into the water was drowned.[15]

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To the medieval Vaishnava poets, Ganga held a lesser appeal. They were devotees of Krishna, whose river was the Jumna. Nonetheless, Ganga appears now and then as a simple poetic image. Jayadeva, author of the most famous medieval poem, describes the lovemaking of Radha and Krishna:

> On the bank where her long braid lay undone,
> his black hair feels the sparkle
> of her necklace.
> There the cloud-dark Jumna
> meets the snowy Ganges at Prayaga.[16]

Among many legends told of Jayadeva, the Ganges is said to have changed its course, flowing near the poet's house so that he could bathe more easily in his old age.[17] The poet Vidyapati repeats the image of Radha in the act of love: 'The broken garlands of her hair toss about like the waves of the Ganges in the water of the Jumna.'[18] The images of river life take on a more erotic color. Radha recollects: 'so long our world was new, we were one like fish and water. Such was our love.'[19]

Ganga also flows in the love songs and ballads of the common people. So a young man says to the woman he adores: 'You are the flower I set before me to worship. You are the water of the Ganges.'[20] Another addresses his beloved: 'I am an outcaste, and you are holy as the Ganges.'[21] A husband describes his blind bride as 'a waterlily floating in the stormy Ganges.'[22] In another ballad, Prince Nanderchand says to Mahua: 'What good is life [without you]? Let yourself be the river Ganges, and I will drown myself in you.'[23]

In a river song from Bhagalpur (ancient Champa), Ganga is personified as a lovely woman called Gango. Kamla is another stream, whose presence means good harvest, while the sparkling adornments are the river's many tributaries. Tirhut is the upland region giving rise to two of these, the Gandak and the Koshi:

> East of the Kamla and west of the Koshi
> there is no woman like Gango.
> Where have you bathed, O Gango,
> Where did you comb your hair?
> Where did you find your sparkling adornments?
> In the Ganges I bathed,
> In Tirhut I combed my hair.
> Why did you bathe, O Gango?

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Why did you comb your hair?
For grace I bathed.
For the endless flowing of my braid,
I combed my hair.
And set in it these bright adornments.[24]

Ganga is likewise the answer to a riddle, an ancient vehicle of folk literature. The following comes from the village of Purulia:

Who is that woman
whose presence is a blessing,
whose embrace redeems us,
whose kiss can bring us immortality?[25]

Ganga in religious rites

In Bengal, from birth to death, Ganga plays a prominent role in the vratas or religious observances of the people. Though nominally Hindu, vratas have their roots in the folk culture and over the centuries became associated with the great tradition. At the morning or evening worship, a passage may be read from the *Bhagavad Gita* and a glass of Ganges water offered to the god.[26] At sunset, in a wish for well-being through the night, Ganga water may be sprinkled over the threshold or in the corner of every room, beginning with the Thakurghor or place of worship.[27]

In temple worship, the devotee would bathe in the Ganges, if possible, before proceeding to the temple. Ramprasad Sen worshipped both Shiva and the goddess Durga with bel leaves and Ganges water. For the installation of a god, the statue would be bathed in several different substances, then dipped in oil and washed in Ganges water.[28] In like manner, an image may be deconsecrated by immersing it in the water of the Ganges.[29]

If a woman is unmarried, her vratas are concerned with obtaining a good husband. So, girls from their tenth to twelfth years may perform a Shiva Puja each morning in the month of Vaishak (April–May), fashioning a Shiva lingam from Ganges clay. At the end of the month, the lingams are immersed in the Ganges or some other body of water.[30] In the Bengali poem *Chandi*, a marriage is celebrated with kusha grass and Ganges water. The women of Bengal still perform a folk dance called 'Gangavatarana' (the descent of Ganga), a ritual marriage dance in which the feet are barely raised from the ground but

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move from side to side. From the waist up, movement is free, and the motion of the hands describes the descent. Ganga also finds her place in the marriage songs of country people. A prospective bride praises Ganga and Durga, the two wives of Shiva:

> Hurry, O Durga, and let us be off.
> For the younger brother of Ramachandra
> has come to invite us.
> Hurry, O Ganga, and let us be off.
> For the younger brother of Ramachandra
> has come to invite us.[31]

The birth of a child brings with it several sacraments. A few days after the birth, a crowd of neighbors accompanies the new mother to the Ganges. There they make offerings to the river, proceeding to the temple of Shashti, goddess of children and the family.[32] In Bengal, for the *upanayana* or sacred thread ceremony, the young man may wear a yellow robe resembling the sannyasin's. For three days he remains indoors, taking nothing but bread and Ganges water.[33] The ceremony includes immersion (*abhisheka*), performed in the Ganges if possible.[34] In times past, for initiation into studenthood a young man would go to the river just before sunrise and perform Shraddhas, rituals for a deceased relative. Along with Ganges water, he would present offerings to the god, at the same time doing honor to the Hindu goddesses.[35]

People in Bengal share the common wish of Hindus to die near the river. Village girls sometimes gather for a prayer to Vishnu, chanting rhetorically: 'she will have vermillion on her head ... and will not see the death of her husband or her sons. She will die in the waters of the Ganges, and will follow in the steps of Vishnu.'[36] The poet Ramprasad exclaims: 'Let my tongue utter Kali in the Ganges at the end.'[37] In the following verse, the maharaja of Nator, a nineteenth-century contemporary, reveals the depth of his attachment to the river:

> When my mind is failing,
> then the name of Kali whispers in my ears.
> It calls me from my bed of sand.
> This body is not mine,
> but passion sweeps it on.
> O Shiva, grant me a rosary
> when I am floating in the Ganges.[38]

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Travelers from Cesare Federici onward attest to the widespread acceptance of the practice. 'When any is sicke,' Federici observes, 'he is brought out of the Country to the banks of the River [Ganges], and there they make him a small Cottage of strawe, and every day they wet him with that water.'[39] Gautier Schouten, who visited Bengal in the seventeenth century, remarks that people 'even carry the water of the Ganges to be made use of by the sick who cannot be brought to the River.'[40] In modern times, during the period of mourning for a dead one, men will bathe in the Ganges and then be shaved on the riverbank by a barber.[41] If the deceased is a parent, a man will also have his head shaved, a sign of ultimate separation, of dying to the world.

In earlier times, people would swear an oath by the sanctity of the river. The *Calcutta Journal* of 24 January 1820 reports the following incident at a hearing of the Supreme Court:

> A native, in giving evidence on a case therein pending, refused to take the oath in the usual manner, viz., on the water of the Gunga. He declared himself to be one of the followers of Ram Mohun Roy [a well-known Bengali reformer] and in consequence, not a believer in the imagined sanctity of this river. He offered to be sworn by the *Vedas,* as a believer in these writings, analogous to the European method as it respects Christian scriptures.

The custom is an old one, for we read of it in the medieval *Dharmamangal* epic where the hero Kalu professes his love for his brother Kamba. 'Here do I take the holy water of the Ganga in my hand,' he says, 'and take the vow that whatever you may demand of me I shall give to you, no matter if it be my head or all my property.' The evil brother demands his head and Kalu complies. Similarly, in the eighteenth-century *Maharashta Purana* a Hindu emissary also swears an oath on Ganga for the safe conduct of Bhaskara, leader of the Maratha invaders. Ultimately the oath is broken and Bhaskara is slain.

Men have praised the river's redeeming powers since the time of the *Mahabharata*. But for ablution the Ganges in Bengal was especially sacred.[42] Van Linschoten in 1585 observed that people came from all the countries of the east to wash away their sins.[43] According to Thomas Bowrey, the Brahmins round about Cossimbazar did a brisk export trade. They were held in such esteem that 'the water and mudde of the Ganges Sent from them with their Choppe (signet) or Seale Upon it is accompted Sacred, even so farre as Persia.'[44] The *History of Liang* records that in the fifth century King Ti Chen of Champa (Vietnam) abdicated his throne so that he might go to India. 'A view of Ganga is a great joy,' he said, 'and left from here for the Ganges.'[45]

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Ganga in festivals

Beneath the outer forms of Hinduism, religion in Bengal pulses with the indigenous gods and forces of the delta. In addition to Vedic ritual, there occur sacrifices of domestic animals to such terrors as snakes, crocodiles, tigers, and diseases like smallpox and cholera. Subject as they are to the caprices of the river, people do *puja* (a prayer with offerings) to Ganga as the Divine Mother. Her worship is more prevalent here than in any other part of India.

The most common form of worship is the snana or bathing festival, popular even among city dwellers. Bathing in the river while chanting mantras is an ancient and widespread custom. But worship of Ganga as an idol is peculiar to the delta. While Ganga dvarapalas (door guardians) appear throughout the country, it is rare to find a temple dedicated exclusively to the goddess. In Bengal, however, Ganga worship assumes an importance second only to the great religious festivals like the Durga Puja.

The Melas are a motley affair, with buying and selling, people bathing and reciting mantras, and a general air of celebration. In the West Dinajpur district, at least five prominent bathing festivals are held throughout the year. At auspicious times, especially during the month of Magh (January–February), Ganga on her makara is worshipped in an established shrine. On the full moon days, thousands attend a big fair, performing *tarpan* (an offering of water to the dead) and conducting special pujas to the goddess. In another village, a clay image of Ganga, with a thatched cottage to house it, is fashioned once a year. Surprisingly, the bathing festival is also popular in areas further removed from the river, such as Cooch Bihar. Here, in the village of Kachuban, we can glimpse the synthesis of Hinduism and folk religion. In the month of Chaitra (March–April), several thousand people gather on a site covering two or more acres, motivated by the belief that Ganga appears on the occasion of Baruni (worship of Varuna, god of the sea and rivers) and identifies herself with the local river Naya.

Other Melas are held for Ganga apart from the bathing fairs. The impact of the river's changing course is reflected in the annual fair at Azimganj on a seven-acre piece of land that was once a bed of the Ganges but is now raised due to the shifting current. In the village of Giridharipur, near Murshidabad, the fishing community offers a Ganga Puja in the month of Ashadha (June–July) or Shravana (July–August). The fishermen believe that the worship will bring them good fortune and improve their catch. It is an old festival; its origins cannot be dated. We can judge the primacy of Ganga from the festival

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Durghakhola in the Nadia district. The worship lasts for eight days in the month of Magh. There is no separate image of the goddess; instead the villagers prepare a clay structure called *mede*. On the top they place an idol of Vishnu, at the lowest part statues of Brahma and Shiva, and in the center an image of Ganga mounted on a makara. Thus the goddess appears as the central figure in the Hindu trinity. In the twin town of Berhampur-Murshidabad, the Mela features a clay model of Ganga on her vahana, with the sage Bhagiratha sounding his conch shell and conducting the goddess to the estuary where she will restore the sons of Sagara. Both banks of the river are thronged with women from all walks of life. They assemble in small groups for pujas and return with potfuls of Ganges water which is preserved throughout the year.

In Bengal, the 'other face of the makara' becomes readily apparent. Here it is a fearsome thing, a force to be propitiated. Here it lacks any connotation as a gentle creature of the waters. In some festivals, people shape a large earthen makara. A baby, also fashioned out of earth, is placed near the mouth of the crocodile to placate its rapacious nature.[46] The *Calcutta Review* of 1859 provides the gruesome details behind such rituals. It explains that stakes are often driven into a riverbed at watering places, allowing people to draw water safely. But a crocodile incited by hunger may climb the bank and slip into the enclosure. The magazine reports the following incident:

> A young Hindu girl about fourteen years old came to get a pitcher of water, and had hardly put her feet into the water, when the crocodile, who had been lying in wait inside the enclosure, rushed at the poor girl, seized her in his formidable jaws, scrambled up the banks of the river, holding the shrieking, struggling girl well up in the air by the middle of her body, and plunged heavily into the river outside of the stake. A smothered scream, a ripple upon the water, a few bubbles, and the frightful scene was closed.

Ships used to have makara prows as a talisman against the terrors of the sea. Even today, Ganga on her makara is often worshipped as protection against catastrophe on a boat journey.[47] Propitiation of the makara forms the basis of the Makarasnan held yearly at Namkhana (in the 24-Parganas), the steamer berth for Sagar Island. In the festival at Dostpur, also in the 24-Parganas, Ganga's vehicle is portrayed as a shark, an equally terrifying animal. Sebastian Manrique reports incredulously that Sagar Island pilgrims would sometimes perform their puja and then, with a solemn vow, enter the sea with the hope of being consumed by sharks. At times a sated shark would reject the offering:

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'They then look upon this escape ... as an event full of ill-luck and misfortune, and hence leave the sea weeping and lamenting loudly, believing that owing to their sins ... they were not considered worthy to have their sacrifices accepted.'[48] Sharks are often known to attack bathers at the mouth of the Hughli River.[49]

The best-known Ganga festival in Bengal is the Mela at Sagar Island. The site is an ancient one mentioned as early as the *Mahabharata.* In the epic, the sage Pulastya promises great spiritual reward for a person who visits the spot 'where Ganga mingles with the sea.'[50] A Bengali poem, the *Manasamangal,* describes the voyage of the merchant Chand, whose fleet set sail from a port in the Ganges Valley. Passing through Bengal, it anchored at Gangasagar, where the merchant performed worship before departing for Patan in Gujarat. In the medieval period, the island often served as a naval base, at one time for the Hindu ruler Pratapaditya, at another for the pirates ravaging the coast of Bengal. Manrique comments on the Portuguese and Magh pirates of Arakan, whose ships 'often call at this island to rest and also ... to seize and carry off the pilgrims [as slaves].'[51] In the early nineteenth century, several attempts at cultivation met with failure as workmen fell prey to sickness and tigers. In 1833, a severe hurricane swept away all the houses and other facilities, and the island reverted once again to what it has always been: a place of pilgrimage.[52]

That pilgrimage is not an easy one. In the past, the only means of transport was by country boat, and the twelve-hour journey from Calcutta often met with disaster. Even now a year seldom passes without a handful of boats capsizing. At one time, Sagar was also the haunt of tigers. Captain Alexander Hamilton's memoirs from the early eighteenth century relate that the island was infested with them and that a hungry tiger might swim out to a boat at night and make off with a sleeping pilgrim.[53] A Bengali journal of 1853 reports that a company of artillery personnel was deputed to frighten off the man-eaters of the Sundarbans by constantly firing heavy guns.[54] In spite of such government precautions, three persons were devoured during the Mela.

The first worship begins at 3 A.M. with a prayer to Kapila Muni, the sage who cursed the sons of Sagara. It is said that Kapila came to Sagar, where he built his hermitage and spent his days in meditation.[55] The pilgrimage is supposed to yield its full benefits only if the devotee remains three days and nights. On the last and most auspicious day, known as *makara sankranti,* people wake in the darkness and drift slowly down to the beach. The first wisps of sunlight turn the gray sand gold as the puja begins with offerings from a dala—a pot containing flowers, coconut, a scented candle, sweets, and a piece

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of cloth that represent one's earthly possessions. As the day wears on, the pilgrims board their country boats for the long journey home. The regular population of Sagar is roughly twenty thousand. On my visit in 1974, the numbers had swelled to half a million.

In Bengali festivals and literature, Ganga is found in conjunction with other deities, sometimes the indigenous gods of the delta. The association provides the local figures some entry into the Hindu fold. This assimilating process is a common feature of Hinduism, begun as early as the *Rig Veda.* In the Maldah village of Gohilla, for example, a bathing festival is held for Ganga and the local goddess Chandi. The Ganga shrine is permanent, but no temple or image exists for Chandi. Manasa, the indigenous serpent goddess, is also connected with Ganga. In the poem *Manasamangal,* Ganga is asked to help sink the boats of a merchant who has offended the serpent goddess. When Ganga refuses, Manasa threatens to poison the river so that none would drink its water and the river would lose its sanctity. Ganga is terrified and agrees to help. In the older versions of the poem, Manasa worship is prescribed as taking place on Dasahara, the same day that Ganga is worshipped, and the custom has prevailed to this day.[56]

At the village of Amarkundu, an annual celebration is held for Ganga and the sun god on the last Sunday of Shravana (July–August). The twin images, housed in a temple, are together known as Gangaditya. The custom goes back at least to the seventeenth century, for Friar Manrique remarks that the Hindus, while divided into different sects, all worship the sun and the river Ganges.[57] Today sick people from Calcutta often go to Tarakeshvar, thirty-five miles from the city, carrying two pots of Ganges water in a sling. They pour the water over a stone slab representing an indigenous sun god assimilated to Shiva. The village is twenty-five miles from the nearest point of the Ganges. Sometimes water is collected from Kali Ghat, which adds another twenty to twenty-five miles. In the hot season, professional carriers of Ganges water sometimes make the trip, dressed as warriors and traveling in a large procession.

Hindu and Muslim practices have often coalesced in Bengal.[58] The sacred river has provided a common theme for both religions. Dharaf Khan's *Ganga-Stotra,* a Sanskrit hymn to the goddess, is still sung today. The big Ganga festival at Berhampur-Murshidabad illustrates the synthesis. Essentially a Muslim event, the Bera celebration draws people of both communities, from near and far. It is traditionally dedicated to Khaja Khizr, patron saint of the waters. On the last Thursday of Bhadra (August–September), a square platform is built

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by lashing together several banana trunks, the structure measuring thirty feet square. On top the artisans place four 20-foot boats made of bamboo strips covered with black paper. Their prows are shaped like makaras. The float is then decorated with flags, minarets, and a cardboard replica of a palace. In earlier days, members of the nawab's family would tie flower garlands on the makara head of the boat. Then a musical procession would make its way to the nawab's palace, carrying bread, sweets, and a gold candle. The boat and offerings were placed on the float. After that, the gold candle was lit, along with several others, and a gun was fired from the nawab's house to mark the beginning of the festival. The ropes were then cut and the platform drifted slowly on the current.[59]

We can find several Hindu elements in the celebration. For one thing, one notes its strong resemblance to the Sedo festival, in which Hindu women launch small banana-trunk boats containing candles and flowers. For another, the musical accompaniment is contrary to Muslim law, especially at religious festivals. Moreover, the event follows the Hindu calendar and has no connection with the Muslim Hidjri reckoning. We can also recognize the makara feature of the boat and the choice of Ganga as the location. Even today the Bera festival is remarkable and attracts huge crowds on both sides of the Ganges. In the days when the nawabs of Murshidabad ruled the country, the spectacle must have been much greater still.

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Gaṅgā

The Goddess Ganges in Hindu Sacred Geography

Diana L. Eck

O Mother Gaṅgā, may your water,
abundant blessing of the world,
treasure of Lord Śiva, playful Lord of all the earth,
essence of the scriptures and
embodied goodness of the gods,
May your water, sublime wine of immortality,
Sooth our troubled souls.[1]

The pursuit of the Goddess in the Hindu tradition leads one to the bank of the river that Hindus revere as Mother—Gaṅgā Mātā, Mother Ganges. Here the mythology of the Hindu tradition and the sacred topography of the land of India flow inseparably together. The Gaṅgā is both goddess and river. She is claimed as the consort of Śiva and Viṣṇu alike. Her waters are said to be the liquid embodiment of *śakti* as well as the sustaining immortal fluid (*amṛta*) of mother's milk. And her *avataraṇa,* her 'descent' to earth, brings both her power and her nurturance to incarnation on the plains of India.

Along her entire length the Gaṅgā is sacred, and just as a temple or a holy city might be circumambulated, so is this entire river circumambulated by a few hardy pilgrims who walk her length from the source to the sea and back again on the other shore. Many *tīrthas*, sacred 'crossings,' pilgrimage places, mark her course: Gangotri, her source in the Himalayas; Hardwar, also known as Gaṅgādvārā, 'Door of the Ganges,' where she breaks out of the mountains into the plains of North India; Prayag, where she joins the Yamuna River as well as the mythical underground Sarasvatī; Banaras (Kāśī), the city of Śiva, where she makes a long sweep to the north as if pointing to her Himalayan source; and, finally, Ganga Sagara, where the river meets the sea in the Bay of Bengal.

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All along the river, and especially at her great *tīrthas*, devout Hindus bathe in the Gaṅgā, taking the waters cupped in their hands and pouring them back into the river as offerings to the *pitṛs* and the *devas*. They present in the river, as in the sanctum of a temple, offerings of flowers. On great occasions they ford the river in boats, shouting, 'Gaṅgā Mātā kī jai!' ('Victory to Mother Ganges!') and trailing garlands of flowers hundreds of feet long to adorn the neck of this Goddess River. They return to their homes, perhaps hundreds of miles away, carrying vessels of her water. And they come again that distance to bring the ashes of their dead to her care.

The *māhātmyas* ('praises') of the Gaṅgā, which are found in the Sanskrit epics and Purāṇas, extol the greatness of the river and describe her many glories. On the most mundane level, the chanting of her name alone is said to relieve poverty, banish bad dreams, and vouchsafe perpetual protection from the falling dung of flying crows.[2] On a more exalted plane, *mokṣa* itself is said to result from bathing in the waters of the Gaṅgā or being cremated on her banks.[3] This is especially the case in the Kali Yuga, our present degenerate era, when the traditional means of gaining release have become too difficult for ordinary people.[4] The Gaṅgā, it is said, is supreme among rivers, as Kāśī is supreme among holy cities and the Himalayas are supreme among mountains.

The Gaṅgā as goddess is more than a single river. She functions in India as the archetype of sacred waters. Other rivers are said to be like the Gaṅgā, others are said even to be the Gaṅgā (such as the River Kaveri, the 'Gaṅgā' of South India).[5] But the Gaṅgā remains the paradigmatic sacred river to which they are likened. The River Gaṅgā is not confined to the course she takes across the plains of North India but participates in that spatial transposition that is so typical of Hindu sacred topography, pervading the sacred waters of all India's great rivers.[6]

If a person elsewhere in India cannot go to the Gaṅgā, going to another sacred stream *is* going to the Gaṅgā. There are said to be seven rivers of such great sanctity: Gaṅgā, Yamuna, Godavari, Sarasvati, Narmada, Sindhu, and Kaveri. If such rivers as these are out of reach, one might simply go to the nearest stream. In fact, in every temple and home the Gaṅgā is called to be present in the waters used in ritual, either by mixing those waters with a few drops of Gaṅgā water or by uttering the name and *mantras* of the Gaṅgā to invoke her presence. The Gaṅgā is the quintessence and source of all sacred waters, and indeed of all waters everywhere.

Not only is the Gaṅgā said to be present in other rivers, but others are also present in her. By bathing in this one river, one bathes in all rivers. As

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a contemporary Indian author writes, 'When a pilgrim dives into the sacred waters of the Gaṅgā, he feels the thrill of plunging into the waters of all the rivers of India.'[7] The *māhātmyas* claim that the Gaṅgā concentrates in her waters some thirty-five million *tīrthas*. More simply, it is said that every wave of the river is a *tīrtha*.[8]

There are few things on which Hindu India, diverse as it is, speaks with one voice as clearly as it does on Gaṅgā Mātā. She carries an immense cultural and religious significance for Hindus, no matter what part of the subcontinent they call home, no matter what their sectarian leaning might be. As one Hindi author writes, 'Even the most hardened atheist of a Hindu will find his heart full of feelings he has never felt before the first time he reaches the bank of the Gaṅgā.'[9]

Some of those 'feelings' were eloquently expressed by Jawaharlal Nehru, who was at the most westernized end of the modern spectrum of Indian life and who loved the Gaṅgā deeply:

> My desire to have a handful of my ashes thrown into the Gaṅgā at Allahabad has no religious significance, so far as I am concerned. I have no religious sentiment in the matter. I have been attached to the Gaṅgā and the Jumna rivers in Allahabad ever since my childhood and, as I have grown older, this attachment has also grown. I have watched their varying moods as the seasons changed, and have often thought of the history and myth and tradition and song and story that have become attached to them through the long ages and become part of their flowing waters. The Gaṅgā, especially, is the river of India, beloved of her people, round which are intertwined her racial memories, her hopes and fears, her songs of triumph, her victories and her defeats. She has been a symbol of India's age-long culture and civilization, ever-changing, ever-flowing, and yet ever the same Gaṅgā. She reminds me of the snow-covered peaks and the deep valleys of the Himalayas, which I have loved so much, and of the rich and vast plains below, where my life and work have been cast.[10]

It is in part the province of scholars to see and uncover those affirmations that have been explicitly denied. As one who considered himself thoroughly secular, Nehru denied that the Gaṅgā had any 'religious' significance for him—presumably meaning 'supernatural' significance. His attachment to the river and his desire to have his ashes thrown into it was, on the contrary, as natural and organic as his love for the land of India. In this, one might say, he was thoroughly Hindu, and his affirmation of the land, its waters, its mountains, was a thoroughly Hindu religious affirmation. For the natural is the religious. Although the river has attracted abundant myth and *māhātmya*,

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it is the river itself, nothing 'supernatural' ascribed to it, that has been so significant for Hindus. The river does not stand for, or point toward, anything greater, beyond itself; it is part of a living sacred geography that Hindus hold in common. It is with certain presuppositions about that common geography that Hindus, even such as Nehru, behold the Gaṅgā. The Gaṅgā is one goddess we cannot consider apart from the land in which she flows and the pattern of symbols that this land embodies.

Living land

Leaving the river for a moment, let us look at some of the mythic images of the cosmos in which the Gaṅgā moves. One of the most striking aspects of the multitude of Hindu cosmogonic myths is the organic, biological vision that they express. The completed universe is imagined as a living organism, a vast ecosystem, in which each part is inextricably related to the life of the whole. And the whole is indeed alive: it is in constant process and movement, growing and decaying. There is no such thing as objectified 'nature' or lifeless 'elements,' for everything belongs to the living pattern of the whole.

One well-known image is that of the sacrifice of the primal giant Puruṣa, a cosmogonic event in which each part of this macrocosmic being became an element of the natural world.[11] From his feet came this earth; from his torso the *antarīkṣa*, the mid-region of the sky, extending as far up as the blue extends; and from his head came the heavens above the sky. More particularly, from his eye came the sun; from his mind, the moon; from his mouth, the gods Indra and Agni; from his breath, the winds.

Another image is that of the Golden Embryo, Hiraṇyagarbha, called in the Rig Veda the 'firstborn of creation,' the egg or embryo that contained within it all the vast and particular life of this cosmos.[12] When it had incubated for a long time, it split open; the top half became heaven; the bottom, earth; and the space between, the mid-region of the sky. The outer membrane became the mountains; the inner membrane, the clouds and mists; the veins of the egg, the rivers; the interior waters, the oceans. Every atom of the universe came from the life of that embryo. In a later myth, the egg is replaced by Viṣṇu, reclining asleep on the cosmic waters, containing within his body the whole of the universe in unmanifest form. When the time is ripe, the lotus springs from his navel, unfolds, and gives birth to Brahmā, the agent of creation.[13]

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These are images of a biological worldview, grounded in the Vedas, strengthened by the indigenous *yakṣa* and *nāga* traditions, and persisting still in the Hindu mythic imagination. It is a view in which the universe, and by extension the land of India, is alive with interconnections and meanings and is likened to a living organism. There is no nature 'worship' here, but a sacramental natural ontology. In an excellent essay, Betty Heimann writes: 'In India the veneration of Nature has never been discarded as outdated and primitive. On the contrary, primitivity is here appreciated in its productive ambiguity and inexhaustible potentialities. Nature cult is the fundament of the earliest forms of Indian religions and remains the basis of even the highest and most exalted speculations of Indian philosophy.'[14]

In this organic ontological vision, the term *symbol*, if we are to use it at all, describes the vehicle of movement from meaning to meaning. Symbols enable one to follow certain strands of the complex interrelatedness of the whole, up and down, back and forth, from heaven to earth, from place to place. Poets use the image of the loom: the universe is woven on the loom, as it were, by two maidens, Night and Day, who lay and draw the threads.[15] Gārgī asks the sage Yājñavalkya, 'What is the warp and woof on which this all is woven?'[16] For this 'All' is a woven fabric. One may follow any thread, horizontally or vertically, seeing it slightly differently in one woven context and then another. One thread runs along the warp from the sun above to the fire here below, to the eye of the sacrificial horse, to the human eye, to the Yamuna River, to the subtle channel called *piṅgalā* within the body-cosmos. Another thread runs from the Moon above, to the Soma that dwells as waters in the vault of the heaven and as plants on earth, to the earthly waters, to the human mind, to the River Gaṅgā, to the subtle channel called *iḍā* within the body-cosmos.[17]

In a sense, everything is a symbol in that it leads into the living web of relationships that constitutes the whole, for symbols do not live alone but in a pattern of meaning shaped by other symbols. But here the symbol does not, as in some Western interpretations, point beyond itself to some other reality. The Holy is constituent of the life and fullness of the whole. The symbolic referent in this organic ontology is not the Holy, but the Whole, which each symbol, each thread, helps to constitute.

Just as the cosmos is a biological whole, so on the microcosmic level the land of India is pictured as an organic whole, a full sacred geography. The living landscape is dense with significance. Each village has its *grāmadevatā*, the lord of its place. The sacred literature is full of *māhātmyas* of place: the Naimiṣa

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forest, the Gaṅgā, Yamuna, and Godavari rivers, the Himalaya and Vindhya mountains. Such places have been affirmed to have particularly strong strands of connection to the macrocosm. They are called *tīrthas*, a word that originally meant 'ford' or 'crossing place' and has come to mean a 'spiritual ford,' a place of pilgrimage.

The earth, like the macrocosmic Puruṣa, is a body, both in its wholeness and its diversity. In the *Mahābhārata* it is put this way:

> Just as certain parts of the body are called clean, so are certain parts of the earth and certain waters called holy.[18]

Those 'certain parts' of earth that give ready access to the heavens are *tīrthas*. They are thresholds, doorways upward, where one's prayers are more quickly heard, one's desires more readily fulfilled, one's rituals bound to bring more abundant blessings. And it is precisely because these doorways were opened by some hierophany, some *avatāra,* that they are *tīrthas* for human beings. *Avatāra* and *tīrtha*, both coming from the root *tṛ*, 'to cross over,' are the dynamics of movements along the warp of the cosmic loom: crossing down and crossing up.

There are thousands of *tīrthas* in India, some well known through the whole land and some of but local prominence. The great *tīrtha* cycles include the seven sacred cities (*saptapurī*); the four divine abodes (*cār dhām*), one at each compass point; and the 'seats' (*pīṭhas*) of the goddess, each corresponding to a part of the body of the goddess Satī.[19] The whole of India adds up to a body-cosmos.

Pilgrims circumambulate the whole of India as a sacred land, visiting the *dhām* at each compass point, marking with their feet the perimeter of the whole, bringing sands from the southern tip of India at Ramesvaram to place in the Gaṅgā when they arrive, and returning with Gaṅgā water to sprinkle the *liṅga* at Ramesvaram. This network of *tīrthas* constitutes the very bones of India as a cultural unit. Considering its long history, India has had but a few hours of political and administrative unity. Its unity as a nation, however, has been firmly constituted by the sacred geography it has held in common and revered: its mountains, forests, rivers, hilltop shrines, and sacred cities. It is no surprise, then, that the national anthem of Nehru's independent India is a litany of the great place-names of her sacred geography. This hymn expresses a Hindu view of the living land that is as old as India itself.

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Living waters

India's rivers have been the life-giving arteries of this living land. The waters of this earthly realm, the rivers and oceans that course through, surround, and support the continents, have, in the Hindu view, their counterparts in heaven, above the vaulted blue of the sky. In the beginnings, they were set free to run upon the earth by the gods themselves. The seers of the *Rig Veda* envisioned the connection in this way:

> Forth from the midst of the flood they flow,
> The sea, their leader, purifying, never-sleeping,
> Indra, the thunderer, the bull, dug out their channels.
> Here may these goddess waters bless me!
>
> Waters that flow from heaven,
> Or spring from the dug earth, or meander freely,
> All of which, bright and pure, head for the ocean,
> Here may these goddess waters bless me!
>
> In whose midst King Varuṇa moves,
> Observing men's truth and falsehood,
> Nectar they are, and bright and pure,
> Here may these goddess waters bless me!
>
> In which King Varuṇa, in which Soma, in which all the gods
> Became drunk with strength,
> In which Agni Vaiśvānara entered,
> Here may these goddess waters bless me![20]

The waters are identified here as divine, as goddesses set free from their heavenly source by Indra, who dug their channels. They are rivers of blessing and purification. Elsewhere in the *Rig Veda* the seven rivers are said to be set free when Vṛtra is slain.[21] There are the great Sindhu, now called the Indus; the Sarasvatī, a river that since Vedic times is said to have disappeared; and the five rivers of the Punjab. Since then, the names of the seven have changed, and the Gaṅgā has become their leader, but the tradition of seven divine rivers has persisted.[22]

The poet seers of the Vedas launched a tradition of praise for the blessing and purifying energy of the 'goddess waters' that continued for more than two thousand years, through the many Puranic *māhātmya*s and *stotra*s to the great poetic hymns to the Gaṅgā, such as Jagannātha's 'Gaṅgā Laharī.' It is

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particularly the life, the movement, the activity of the waters of the Gaṅgā that has attracted poets and devotees through the ages. Hers are not the motionless waters of the pre-creation seas, but running, energetic waters of life. The traditional etymology of Gaṅgā derives the name from the verb *gam,* 'to go.'[23] Her hymns constantly emphasize the running, flowing, energetic movement of her waters, and they do so at times with elaborate alliteration and onomatopoeia, as in this line from the famous 'Gaṅgā Laharī'; *marullīlā-lolallaharī-lulitāmbhoja-paṭala.* (May your running waters ... 'covered with lotuses that rock in your waves and roll playfully in the wind' ... weaken the web of my earthly life.)[24]

It is running water that is the chief agent of purification in the complex Hindu scheme of purity and pollution. Water absorbs pollution, but when it is running, it carries pollution away as well. It is in part because they are 'never-sleeping' that these goddess waters bring purification. The Gaṅgā *māhātmyas* proclaim her purifying powers in elaborate detail: even to be touched by a breeze bearing a tiny droplet of Gaṅgā water will erase the sins of lifetimes in an instant!

Avataraṇa

Each year as the hot and dry season reaches its peak in May and early June, Hindus celebrate the descent of the Gaṅgā from heaven to earth in anticipation of the monsoon rains. The day is Gaṅgā Daśaharā, the tenth day of the bright fortnight of the month of Jyeṣṭha. It is called the 'birthday' of the Gaṅgā, and on that day her banks are crowded with bathers. A dip in the Gaṅgā 'destroys ten [sins]' (*daśahara*) or ten lifetimes of sins; but as festival manuals confirm, even those far from the Gaṅgā may gain similar benefits from bathing in whatever 'Gaṅgā' is near at hand.[25]

The descent—*avataraṇa*—of heavenly waters to earth is an ancient theme with many variations in Hindu mythology. In one of the great Vedic myths, Indra, who has pillared apart heaven and earth and established the sky between them, engages in combat with the great serpent Vṛtra, who has coiled around the vault of heaven and closed up the celestial waters.[26] The waters stored in the vault of heaven are often identified with *soma,* the nectar of the gods and the strengthening elixir of immortality. In defeating Vṛtra, Indra sets free these divine waters for the nourishment of the earth.

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In the many Vaiṣṇava versions of the myth, the river is called Viṣṇupadī, after its origin in Viṣṇupada ('the celestial realm of Viṣṇu' or 'the foot of Viṣṇu'). Viṣṇu, who in the *Rig Veda* was Indra's helper in releasing the nectarous waters, is here the primary cause of their descent to earth. In taking his famous three strides, Viṣṇu, the dwarf-turned-giant, stretched through and took possession of the threefold universe. With his third stride he is said to have pierced the vault of heaven with his toe and released the heavenly waters.[27] Through this opening in the shell of the universe, the Gaṅgā, which had hitherto flowed around the cosmic egg, flowed into the heavens, landing first in Indra's heaven, where she was caught by the steady polestar Dhruva. From there she ran down the sky to the moon as the Milky Way, and from the moon to the realm of Brahmā situated just above Mount Meru, rimmed by the peaks of the eight directions and forming the calyx of the lotus of this world. From Meru, the river split into four parts and ran out upon the various lotus-petal continents. One branch, the Alakanandā, flowed into Bhāratavarṣa (India) as the Gaṅgā.[28]

In the most celebrated myth of the Gaṅgā's descent to earth, it is Śiva whose role is predominant. The story, which is told in the *Rāmāyana,* the *Mahābhārata,* and in many Purāṇas, is too long to recount here.[29] What is significant for our understanding of the goddess Gaṅgā, however, is that the Gaṅgā fell from heaven in order to revive the sixty thousand sons of King Sagara, burned to ashes by the scorching heat of the glance of the sage Kapila, whose meditation they had rudely disturbed. It was Bhagīratha whose rigorous ascetic discipline finally won the favor of Gaṅgā. She agreed to come to earth, but was certain that the earth would shatter under the force of her fall. Śiva promised to catch her on his head and tame her in the thicket of his ascetic's hair before releasing her to flow upon the earth. Thus did the Gaṅgā fall, winding her way through Śiva's hair and out upon the plains of India, where Bhagīratha took charge of her and led her to the sea. From there she reached the netherworld and became the saving funereal waters for the sons of Sagara.

According to some accounts, the Gaṅgā split into seven streams as she emerged from the hair of Śiva, three flowing to the east, three to the west, and the Bhāgīrathī to the south. This tradition recalls the seven rivers of the Vedic hymns and reminds us that the Gaṅgā in essence waters the whole earth. Indeed, when Bhagīratha brought the Gaṅgā to earth, her waters not only restored the ashes of the dead but also replenished the ocean, which had been swallowed by the sage Agastya.[30]

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It is because the Gaṅgā descended in her *avataraṇa* that she is a place of ascent as a *tīrtha*. She, as *triloka-patha-gaminī*, 'flowing in the three worlds,' has crossed over from heaven to earth to the netherworld and has thus become a place of crossing for human beings, both the living and the dead. As she quickened the ashes of the sons of Sagara, so will she quicken the ashes of all the dead. Thus it is that the story of the Gaṅgā *avataraṇa* is read at *śrāddha* ceremonies, that Gaṅgā water is used in *śrāddha* and *tarpaṇa* rites, and that the place where the Gaṅgā skirts the Mahāśmaśāna, the 'Great Cremation Ground' of holy Banaras, has made that place the best place to die in all of India. For the dead, the Gaṅgā has the epithet *svarga-sopana-saraṇī*, 'the flowing staircase to heaven.' There is no theme more pervasive in Gaṅgā hymnody than the yearning for the lap of the Gaṅgā at the time of death. The popular 'Gaṇgāṣṭakam,' for instance, begins with the following verse:

> O Mother! Cowife of Pārvatī! Necklace adorning the worlds!
> Banner rising to heaven!
> I ask that I may take leave of this body on your banks,
> drinking your water, rolling in your waves,
> remembering your name, bestowing my gaze upon you![31]

Liquid consort

The mythology of the *Devī Bhāgavata* and *Brahmavaivarta Purāṇas* relates the Gaṅgā closely to Viṣṇu and more specifically to Krishna as one of the forms of the female *prakṛti* 'nature,' or in some instances as one of the forms of Rādhā herself.[32] In one instance, the Gaṅgā in human form, sitting with great adoration next to Krishna, arouses the jealously of Rādhā, who threatens to drink her up. Gaṅgā immediately disappears, taking refuge inside the foot of Krishna. The earth is then distressed by the drought that results from Gaṅgā's disappearance. It is only when the gods supplicate Rādhā and calm her jealousy that Gaṅgā emerges from the foot of Krishna and flows forth again.[33]

In another myth, the three cowives of Viṣṇu—Gaṅgā, Sarasvatī, and Lakṣmī—quarrel among themselves over the attentions of their common husband. Both Sarasvatī and Gaṅgā curse one another to become rivers on earth and to bear the burden of human sins. At this point, Viṣṇu intervenes, and specifies that in their lives as rivers Sarasvatī will become the wife of Brahmā and Gaṅgā will become the wife of Śiva. Lakṣmī, who had done nothing but try

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to mediate in the quarrel, will become the sacred *tulasī* plant and will remain his wife.[34] Gaṅgā and Sarasvatī, however, lament so loudly that Viṣṇu finally agrees that while they go their separate ways they will remain, in essence, with him.

If Gaṅgā is a cowife of Viṣṇu and a form of Rādhā, it is clear that her relationship to the Lord is intimate, so much so, in fact, that she flows out of his very body. And as Krishna and Rādhā share one body, so do they mingle in the waters of the Gaṅgā. One striking account tells of the full harvest moon of the autumn month of Kārttika. All the gods have assembled and watch in awe as Krishna and Rādhā dance. As Śiva sings rapturous songs, they all fall into a swoon, and when they come to their senses, the magic circle of Rādhā's and Krishna's dance has become a sea of water. The two have liquified to become the waters of the Gaṅgā.[35]

Liquid śakti

From the Śaiva point of view, it is Śiva whose relationship with Gaṅgā is most prominent and most intimate. If she is consort of Hari, so is the *śakti* of Śiva; if she flows from the foot of Viṣṇu, so she meanders in Śiva's hair.

Śiva as Gaṅgādhara, 'Bearer of the Gaṅgā,' is commonly depicted wearing the Gaṅgā in his hair, either as the mermaid who clings to the crescent moon in his topknot or as the stream of water spurting up like a geyser. The Gaṅgā, therefore, is Śiva's constant companion, making his tangled ascetic's locks her way station on her perpetual fall from heaven to earth. Her *avataraṇa* is a continuing process, not a single event; each wave of the Gaṅgā falls upon Śiva before reaching the earth. In agreeing to bear the Gaṅgā, Śiva involved himself in a relationship rather than a simple project.

So close is the relationship of Gaṅgā and Śiva that she is called his wife and is occasionally depicted in sculpture approaching him as a bride.[36] Naturally, as cowife and rival, she arouses the jealousy of Pārvatī, much as she does that of Rādhā. Gaṅgā, born of Himalaya, the Mountain, and his wife Menā is in fact Pārvatī's sister; but she is also Pārvatī's rival. Pārvatī's jealousy became a favorite theme of both poets and artists. The poet Jagannātha, for instance, writes:

> Who here can speak the greatness of your gracious form,
> which vanquishes our worldly fears

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by its mere beholding,
which Śiva ever holds upon his head,
despite the strong entreaties of the Mountain's daughter
who grows faint with envy.[37]

Śiva is called Umā-Gaṅgā-patīśvara, 'Husband and Lord of Umā (Pārvatī) and Gaṅgā,' and is depicted as such by artists, who show Gaṅgā clinging to his hair and a frowning Pārvatī turning her face away in jealousy.[38]

In the *Skanda Purāṇa* Śiva, speaking to Viṣṇu, resolves the issue by identifying Gaṅgā with Pārvatī as the female aspect of the Divine, however construed:

As Gaurī (Pārvatī) is, so is the Gaṅgā. Therefore, whoever worships Gaurī properly also worships the Gaṅgā.

And as I am, so are you, O Viṣṇu. And as you are, so am I. And as Umā (Pārvatī) is, so is the Gaṅgā. The form is not different.

And whoever says that there is some difference between Viṣṇu and Rudra, between Śrī and Gaurī , or between the Gaṅgā and Gaurī is a very foolish person.[39]

The Gaṅgā embodies the Supreme Sadā-Śiva's active energy or *śakti*. *Śakti* is that life energy, conceived as female, through which the qualityless, ineffable Sadā-Śiva manifests himself in the world. This *śakti* can be apprehended, praised, and loved. She can even be touched in this, her liquid form. A contemporary Hindi religious writer speaks of the Gaṅgā as the 'liquid image' (*mūrti*) of Parabrahma, Paramātmā.[40] Kālidāsa, in the *Kumārasambhava,* calls her *śambhor ambumayi-mūrti:* Śiva's water-form.[41] It is a female form, flowing out upon the earth for the blessing of all. Says the *māhātmya* from the *Skanda Purāṇa:*

She, the Gaṅgā, is my supreme image, having the form of water, the very essence of Śiva's soul. She is nature (*prakṛti*) supreme and the basis of countless universes.

For the protection of the world do I playfully uphold the Gaṅgā, who is mother of the world, the supreme Brahman's very embodiment.[42]

As this 'embodiment' the Gaṅgā makes Śiva's activity in the world possible. Śiva-in-action is indeed *śakti*, the energy that creates and nourishes all the manifest universe. Without this energy, that One is unnameable, qualityless,

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and without expansion. *Śakti* bodies forth the living cosmos, and the Gaṅgā is liquid *śakti*. Her fall from heaven to the head of Śiva is repeated countless times daily in the simple ritual act of pouring water upon the Śiva *liṅga*. The unutterable incandescence of the *liṅga* of fire is joined with the torrential energy of the celestial waters. Without the Gaṅgā, Śiva would remain the scorching, brilliant *liṅga* of fire; without Śiva, the Gaṅgā would flood the earth.[43] Bearing her on his head, Śiva became the vehicle for the Gaṅgā's fall. But if Śiva is a vehicle for the Gaṅgā, she is also a vehicle for Śiva: for it is through her liquid *śakti* that Śiva is able to enter into the world as an active agent of salvation. As Skanda explains to Agastya in one of the Gaṅgā *māhātmyas:*

> O Agasyta, one should not be amazed at the notion that the Gaṅgā is really Śakti, for is she not the supreme energy of the eternal Śiva, which has taken the form of water?[44]

The Śiva we speak of here, however, is not Rudra-Śiva but the One called Sadā-Śivā, who includes and transcends Brahmā, Viṣṇu, and Rudra-Śiva. The Gaṅgā as the liquid *śakti* of this Supreme Śiva embodies all these gods, just as in another context she is said to embody Krishna and Rādhā together. The opening stanza of one hymn makes this clear:

> Om. Praise be to the auspicious Gaṅgā, gift of Śiva, O praise! Praise be to her who is Viṣṇu embodied, the very image of Brahmā, O praise!
>
> Praise to her who is the form of Rudra, Śaṅkara, the embodiment of all gods, the embodiment of healing, O praise![45]

Likewise, the opening stanza of the 'Gaṅgā Laharī' calls her the 'essence of the scriptures and embodied goodness of the gods.'[46]

Mother Gaṅgā

It is significant that Gaṅgā is the embodied 'goodness' of the gods, for hers is an energy perpetually praised as good. Her destructive force is utterly purified and calmed in the hair of Śiva. As she flows out upon the plains, she is Mother, and she is the perfect dream-mother: embracing, nourishing, and forgiving, without a trace of anger. In India, where virtually every manifestation of female divinity is tinged with ambiguity, it is noteworthy that this

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river, which possesses such tremendous potential for destruction, is acclaimed in such unambiguous terms.

The image of rivers as mothers is ancient and widespread. The Vedic poets say, for instance, that when Indra released the waters of heaven, they ran out upon the earth like mother cows to suckle their young, like milk cows rich in milk.[47] The poets beg of the rivers, 'Like longing mothers, give to us here on earth the most blessed nectar that you have!'[48] When the cow-rivers run upon the earth they are pregnant with the sun; they are also called the mothers of Agni, fire.

The Gaṅgā inherits her mothering capacities from those ancient waters. It is she who accepts from Agni the burning seed of Śiva and becomes the mother of the war god, Skanda.[49] Elsewhere, as the wife of Śantanu, she is the mother of the eight Vasus and of the hero-sage Bhīṣma. When Bhīṣma finally dies in the great battle of the *Mahābhārata*, she rises in human form from the river, weeping as bitterly as any mother.[50]

The waters of the Gaṅgā are the drink of life. As the gods drink *soma* for life, so do humans drink Gaṅgā water. It is as nourishing as mother's milk, and indeed the *Mahābhārata* compares human thirst for her waters to that of hungry children thirsting for their mothers' milk.[51]

It is as Mother Gaṅgā that this river is most universally known to Hindus, and, like a mother, the Gaṅgā can be trusted to render unconditional love to her children. Even those utterly unfit for salvation by Brahmanical standards will be embraced and saved by the Gaṅgā.

In India today the most widely known hymn to the Gaṅgā is the 'Gaṅgā Laharī' of the seventeenth-century poet Jagannātha, whose patrons were the Mughal emperor Shāh Jahān and his son, the *littérateur* prince Dārā Shikoh. The poet was outcasted by his Brahmin subcaste because of his long love affair with a Muslim woman at court. According to legend, Jagannātha went to Banaras to try to restore his status by proving himself acceptable to Brahmins there, but he was unsuccessful. As the story goes, he sat with his beloved atop the fifty-two steps of Pañcagaṅgā Ghāṭ and, with each of the fifty-two verses he composed, the river rose one step. At the conclusion of the hymn, the waters touched the feet of the poet and his beloved, purified them, embraced them, and carried them away.[52]

In the 'Gaṅgā Laharī' Jagannātha addresses the river as Mother, the one who will love and claim the child rejected by everyone else. He is so despicable that he is shunned even by outcastes; he is criticized even by madmen; he is so filthy with sin that all the *tīrthas* hang their heads in shame at their inability

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to cleanse him. There are plenty of gods who will care for the good, but who except the Gaṅgā will care for the wicked?[53] He approaches the Gaṅgā with complete trust and faith:

> I come to you as a child to his mother.
> I come as an orphan
> to you, moist with love.
> I come without refuge
> to you, giver of sacred rest
> I come a fallen man
> to you, uplifter of all.
> I come undone by disease
> to you, the perfect physician.
> I come, my heart dry with thirst,
> to you, ocean of sweet wine.
> Do with me whatever you will.[54]

Above all, it is mercy and compassion that flow out from the foot of Viṣṇu or from the hair of Śiva in the form of this mothering river. It nourishes the land and all its creatures, living and dying. The hymns repeatedly affirm that this river is intended as a vehicle of mercy:

> This Gaṅgā was sent out for the salvation of the world by Śambhu, Lord of lords, filled with the sweet wine of compassion.

> Śaṅkara, having squeezed out the essence of *yoga* and the Upaniṣads, created this excellent river because of his mercy for all creatures.[55]

In earlier ages and better times *mokṣa* could be had only by means of meditation (*dhyāna*), austerities (*tapas*), or ritual sacrifice (*yajña*). But now, it is said, in this Kali Yuga, these are no longer viable. Only the Gaṅgā can bring the blessings of salvation.[56]

The river

The Gaṅgā's history in the Hindu mythological tradition is long and rich. Here we have only pointed to some of its various facets. As a celestial stream flowing upon the earth she has her mythic origins in the world of the Vedas. As the tradition developed, she wound her way into the myth and ritual of Vaiṣṇavas and Śaivas alike. She is hardly the best-known consort of either

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Viṣṇu or Śiva, but she has acquired the position of consort to both of them, something no other goddess can claim. Even Brahmā keeps close company with her, carrying the river in his water pot.

The river's accumulation of mythological traditions demonstrates the distinctive persistence of natural geographical symbols in India. For the Gaṅgā is most certainly not loved and worshiped because she is spouse of Śiva, cowife of Pārvatī, consort of Viṣṇu, or the liquified Rādhā-Krishna. Rather, she has attracted this mythology over the years precisely because she is worshiped and loved. Here one sees the difference between the organic myth or symbol and the narrative one. For the Gaṅgā's significance as a symbol is not exhaustively narrative. First, she is a river that flows with waters of life in a vibrant universe. Narrative myths come and go in history. They may shape the cosmos and convey meaning for many generations, and then they may gradually lose their hold upon the imagination and finally be forgotten. But the river remains, even when the stories are no longer repeated. The river flows on, bringing life and conveying the living tradition, even to those of this age for whom everything else is demythologized.

In the Hindu tradition, any place can become the sacred abode of the gods, if the proper rites are performed. When a temple is consecrated and its image installed, the great rites of *pratiṣṭhā* serve to call the presence of the divine to that place. With any image fashioned of wood or stone or rudely crafted of clay, rites of invitation (*āvahana*) are observed at the beginning of worship, inviting the deity to be present, and rites of dismissal (*visarjana*) are observed at worship's end, giving the deity leave to go. With the worship of the Gaṅgā no such rites are ever observed. This river is no ordinary image in which the divine has come to dwell. She is celestial—unmediated and immediate. Whatever is holy, whatever is merciful, whatever is utterly auspicious is already there.

Notes

1. Jagannātha, *Gaṅgā Laharī* (Varanasi: Ṭhākur Prasād and Sons, n.d.), verse 1. Translations from this work and from the Vedic and Sanskrit sources are my own.

2. *Skanda Purāṇa*, Kāśī Khaṇḍa 27.22 (Calcutta: Gurumaṇḍala Granthamālāya no. 20, 1961), vol. 4. The Kāśī Khaṇḍa will hereafter be cited as KK.

3. KK 27.30, 37, 105, and 134.

4. KK 27.18; 28.27-29.

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5. For a discussion of the way in which the Gaṅgā is an all-India agent of Sanskritization, see M.N. Srinivas, *Religion and Society among the Coorgs of South India* (London: Oxford University Press, 1952), p. 214. Srinivas discusses the sanctity of the Kāverī and, in an appendix, recounts the Kāverī's myth of origin.

6. For a discussion of what I have termed 'spatial transposition,' see my *Banaras, City of Light* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1982), pp. 39–42, 283–94.

7. Raj Bali Pandey, *Varanasi: The Heart of Hinduism* (Varanasi: Orient Publishers, 1969), p. 30.

8. Rāmpratāp Tripāṭhī, *Purāṇō mẽ Gaṅgā* (Prayag: Hindī Sāhitya Sammelan, 1952), p. *jha.*

9. Ibid., p. *ga.*

10. From Jawaharlal Nehru's will and testament, quoted in Eric Newby and Raghubir Singh, *Gaṅgā: Sacred River of India* (Hong Kong: Perennial Press, 1974), p. 9.

11. *Rig Veda* 10.90.

12. See *Rig Veda* 10.82 and 10.121.

13. See, for example, *Kūrma Purāṇa* 1.9. *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* 2.5.6 and *Mārkaṇḍeya Purāṇa* 45–47 also contain accessible accounts of the transformation of the Hiraṇ-yagarbha motif.

14. Betty Heimann, *Facets of Indian Thought* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1964), p. 107, in the essay entitled 'Indian Metaphysics.' I am also deeply indebted to another essay in this posthumous collection, 'India's Biology,' in which Heimann develops the notion of a biological worldview.

15. See, for example, *Atharva Veda* 10.7 and *Rig Veda* 10.130.

16. *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* 3.6 and 3.8.

17. The esoteric symbolism of the two rivers is elaborated by Heinrich von Stietencron in his work *Gaṅgā und Yamunā* (Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz, 1972). He deals primarily with the river goddesses as they appear to the right and left of medieval temple entrances in northern India.

18. *Mahābhārata* 13.111.16.

19. 'Ayodhyā, Mathurā, Māyā (Hardwar), Kāśī, Kāñcī, Avantikā (Ujjain), and the city of Dvārāvatī (Dvārakā)—these seven give *mokṣa.*' This verse describing the *saptapurī* is found in many Purāṇas and is known to practically every literate Brahmin. The four divine abodes are Purī in the east, Rameśvaram in the south, Dvārakā in the west, and Badrināth in the north. On the *pīṭhas*, see D.C. Sircar, *The Śākta Pīṭhas* (1948; repr. Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1973).

20. *Rig Veda* 7.49.

21. The seven are mentioned repeatedly as a group. See, for example, *Rig Veda* 1.32.12, 1.34.8, 2.12.12, and 4.28.1. *Rig Veda* 10.75 mentions the Gaṅgā, but she does not figure among the seven.

22. These seven rivers are the Gaṅgā, Yamunā, Godāvarī, Sarasvatī, Narmadā, Kāverī, and Sindhu.

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23. Amarasiṃha, *Amarakośa* (Varanasi: Chowkhamba Sanskrit Series no. 198, 1970).

24. Jagannātha, *Gaṅgā Laharī*, verse 20.

25. Rāmpratāp Trīpaṭhī, *Hinduō ke Vrat, Parva, aur Tyauhār* (Allahabad: Lokbhāratī Prakāśān, 1971), p. 86.

26. See W. Norman Brown, 'The Creation Myth of the Rig Veda,' *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 62, no. 2 (1942): 85–98. See also, for example, *Rig Veda* 1.32, 2.12.

27. *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* 5.17; *Devī Bhāgavata Purāṇa* 8.7. Sculpture depicts this myth as well. C. Sivaramamurti, in *Gaṅgā* (New Delhi: Orient Longman, 1976), includes two plates from twelfth-century Mysore in which Brahmā is shown pouring the Gaṅgā from his water pot upon Vāmana-Viṣṇu's upraised foot.

28. *Kūrma Purāṇa* 1.44; *Brahmavaivarta Purāṇa,* Kṛṣṇajanma Khaṇḍa 34; *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* 5.17; *Viṣṇu Purāṇa* 2.2.8.

29. For versions of the story, see *Rāmāyana* 1:38–44; *Mahābhārata* 3.104–8; *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* 9.8–9; *Brahmavaivarta Purāṇa,* Prakṛti Khaṇḍa 10; *Devī Bhāgavata Purāṇa* 9.11; and KK 30. K. Damodaran Nambiar lists many others in 'The Nārada Purāṇa: A Critical Study,' *Purāṇa* 15, no. 2, supplement (1973): 1–56. In several accounts of the *avataraṇa* it is Krishna to whom appeal is made by Bhagīratha.

30. The *Mahābhārata* account of the *avataraṇa,* for instance, immediately follows the story of Agastya's swallowing the ocean.

31. 'Śrī Gaṅgāṣṭaka,' verse 1, in *Nityakarma Vidhi tathā Devapūjā Paddhati* (Varanasi: Ṭhākurdās Surekā Cairitī Phaṇḍ, 1966).

32. See C. Mackenzie Brown, *God as Mother: A Feminine Theology in India* (Hartford, Vt.: Claude Stark and Company, 1974), pp. 161–67.

33. *Brahmavaivarta Purāṇa*, Prakṛti Khaṇḍa 11; *Devī Bhāgavata Purāṇa* 9.13.

34. *Brahmavaivarta Purāṇa*, Prakṛti Khaṇḍa 6; *Devī Bhāgavata Purāṇa* 9.6.

35. *Brahmavaivarta Purāṇa*, Prakṛti Khaṇḍa 10; *Devī Bhāgavata Purāṇa* 9.1 2.

36. Sivaramamurti, *Gaṅgā*, fig. 6.

37. Jagannātha, *Gaṅgā Laharī*, verse 12.

38. Śivaramamurti, *Gaṅgā*, pp. 21–24, figs. 7 and 8.

39. KK 27.182–84.

40. Tripāṭhi, *Hinduō ke Vrat*, p. 95.

41. Kālidāsa, *Kumārasambhava* 10.26.

42. KK 27.8–9.

43. For other elaborations of the *agni-soma* polarity and resolution, see Wendy Doniger O'Flaherty, *Asceticism and Eroticism in the Mythology of Śiva* (London: Oxford University Press, 1973), pp. 286–92.

44. KK 28.84.

45. KK 27.157–58.

46. Jagannātha, *Gaṅgā Laharī*, verse 1, quoted at the start of this essay.

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47. *Rig Veda* 10.75.

48. *Rig Veda* 10.9.

49. O'Flaherty, *Asceticism and Eroticism*, pp. 93–110, describes the many myths of the birth and multiple mothers of Skanda.

50. *Mahābhārata* 1.95–100 describes her marriage to Śantanu and the birth of the Vasus and Bhīṣma. *Mahābhārata* 13.154.18–25 tells of Gaṅgā's lament at the death of Bhīṣma.

51. *Mahābhārata* 13.27.48–52.

52. The legend, which is well known, at least among the traditionally educated of Kāśī, has several variants. Lakshman Ramachandra Vaidya related something of Jagannātha's life and legend in his English introduction to the Sanskrit text of another of Jagannātha's poems, the *Bhāminī Vilāsa* (Bombay: Bhāratī Press, 1887).

53. These summarize some of the sentiments of *Gaṅgā Laharī*, verses 13, 28, 29, and 45.

54. *Gaṅgā Laharī*, verse 24.

55. KK 28, 84 and 88.

56. KK 27.19.

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Why Sink Flowers? Bringing It All Back Home

Ann Grodzins Gold

Every person questioned agreed that to sink flowers at a crossing place in the Ganges* and return to the village without a sealed pot of Ganges river water would be wholly meaningless and futile. I tried to provoke informants on this by asking questions such as, 'Well, what if you didn't, then what?' and the results were uniform. In the first place, it was unthinkable, and in the second place, if anyone were to commit such folly, their whole journey would have been for nothing. These emphatic responses were particularly striking when elicited from persons who, earlier in the same interview, had denied that any benefit other than 'seeing the land' accrued to pilgrims in any case. What then could be lost by neglecting to bring home water? The answer to this will emerge through an examination, first, of some answers to the question of 'Why sink flowers?' and second, of the Celebration of Ganga. On that occasion, referred to as an honored guest, the river of crossing places is welcomed into the village, and a feast is held by the pilgrim who brought her back with him.

Several informants, most of them male, all of whom had personally made the pilgrimage with flowers, very emphatically denied any reason for it other than acquiescence to social pressures. Here is how one old man of the Mali caste put it:

INTERVIEWER: The way people take flowers and perform *piṇḍadān*—why do they do this?

PILGRIM: I don't know. Our forefathers did it, so we also do it. Even better than this is to take your mother and father there when they

* 'To sink flowers' means to deposit the ashes or bones of ancestors in the Ganges–Editors.

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are alive and cause them to bathe. Yes, to bring the flowers, what use is it? If when they are living you don't cause them to bathe, after they die, what is the use? The flowers are a pretext. He himself [the son] is enjoying his trip. And, if he doesn't do this then others say, 'Hey, your forefathers are lying here, so drop them in Gangaji.'

INTERVIEWER: So people only go for the sake of their reputation?

PILGRIM: Yes, for their reputation.

Another interviewee, again an aged male but of the Nath caste,[1] expressed this perspective even more bluntly in an interview conducted without my being present by my assistant, Bhoju.

PILGRIM: Suppose you, Bhoju, did not take your mother and father, then what would they [your caste-fellows] do to you? Nobody could do anything. But, whereas now they say [praisefully], 'Oh, Bhoju is like this; Bhoju is like this,' then, if your mother and father died and you did not take them, they would say [insultingly], 'Oh that Bhoju, that son-of-a-cock-eater, he did not take them.' Nothing else at all is in it. That's it, Bhoju, I see nothing else in this [practice of going to crossing places], no other reason for it.... If you don't do it, people will taunt you, like this: 'Which Ganga-Gaumati have you dumped your mother and father in anyway?' Because of this kind of taunting, people die [expend all their resources]. So for this reason, everyone takes their mother and father to Ganga-Gaumati and they all become destitute.

A third man, another elderly Mali, spoke in the same vein, contrasting true *dharma,* which could better be performed in the course of ordinary life, to the false, or socially pretentious, *dharma* of pilgrimage.

PILGRIM: Journeys to crossing places are right here.

INTERVIEWER: How do you mean?

PILGRIM: Serve your mother and father greatly. Afterwards, if you desire to go to a crossing place, then go, but if not, no matter, Ganga and Gaumati are right here. If, while he [one's father] is alive you don't give him bread, then what use is it to drop his flowers after he's dead.... And as for feasts, they are the debt of a morsel. If we don't hold feasts, people speak ill of us. If it weren't for this, who

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would hold them? If someone doesn't hold a feast, then people say; 'Your father died and you didn't even offer up a spark.'

INTERVIEWER: Suppose a person has not served his parents in their lifetimes, after they die why does he get the desire to take them to a crossing place?

PILGRIM: It's a mistake.

PILGRIM'S SON (who has been listening silently): If someone's mother and father are not satisfied here, then where is the advantage in taking them there?

The taunting received by those who do not sink flowers is clearly standardized. Even the same obscene insult—'son-of-a-cock-eater'—was cited by several separate informants in this context, and it is one I never encountered in any other. A man of the Gujar caste, however, went on from reasons of public pressure to articulate other rationales for the pilgrimage also touched on in the preceding statements. These included the fulfillment of duty toward one's mother and father—traditionally conceptualized as one of the three debts which every man ideally pays to his superiors in a single lifetime[2]—as well as the obligation to hold return feasts, a kind of community debt based on reciprocity. Finally, he suggested the achievement of a more diffuse release, which he saw as a logical result of fulfilling biomoral obligations. These comments were made in the course of a discussion about why people prefer to take flowers to the Ganges rather than to some more accessible crossing place in Rajasthan, such as Pushkar.

PILGRIM: People will say, 'Oh you son-of-a-cock-eater, have you dropped your forefathers in Ganga-Gaumati? What kind of work, like causing prostitutes to dance, have you done? [How have you squandered your money?] Several generations of flowers are lying here, and have you dropped them in Gangaji?' There [at the Ganges] the tradition will be fulfilled; the debt [*karj*] will be finished. When we drop them in Hardwar, in the Ganges, we feel that our debt [*urṇ*] is acquitted—that debt which from our soul we owe to our mother and father is acquitted. This is the reason for going to Hardwar; if not, you might as well put them in Pushkar.

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INTERVIEWER: The debt we owe our mother and father is paid in full?

PILGRIM: Yes, it is paid in full, and the penalty [*daṇḍ*] of the caste, that also is settled. We hold a feast and this settles the penalty of the caste. [Feasting is owed to those caste-fellows who have feasted you.] If there is a man of good fortune in our lineage, he does this work, as it says in the song: 'A well-fated one of the lineage has come to take you to Gangaji.' This means, in the lineage a fortunate person has come who is going to take the flowers of his lineage and bring Ganges Mother to the village.... We go there for *dharma,* so *moksha* also happens. It is a matter of here and there. From rinsing the bones, the debt is acquitted.[3] At God's door, surely some fruit or other is received.

This man's answers encompass a range of reasons for the journey with flowers, from response to community pressure to intra-familial morality to consequent improvement of the inner, subtle self. A similar interplay of inner and outer reasons and attitudes underlying Ganges pilgrimage appears in the following conversation with a married couple of the Kumavat caste.[4] When I talked with them on the last day of the bus pilgrimage, they were already planning and anticipating their Celebration of Ganga.

INTERVIEWER: Did you give an invitation to Bhairuji in Banaras?

WIFE [HEREAFTER W]: Yes, we gave one in all the places. We gave them all invitations: 'Please grace our house.' At all the crossing places we gave invitations: 'Come all! Come all!' Back in the village people say, 'Where have you dropped the flowers? In what Gayaji have you dropped the flowers?' [a version of the usual taunt to which she can now reply proudly] but I have put my son's wife in Gayaji. And I said this to Gayaji, 'You also please come.'

INTERVIEWER: But when will she come?

W: When I hold a feast ... at that time she will come.... But this is on my mind. My son, whose wife died, after Dev Uṭhaṇī Gyāras [Gods-Getting-Up Eleventh][5] we will bring a second wife for him and we will hold the walking-stick celebration at that time. This is on my mind.

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INTERVIEWER: When someone dies, why do we put their flowers in Hardwar or Gayaji?

HUSBAND [HEREAFTER H]: It is an old custom.

W: Our ancestors did it and for this reason so do we. And if we don't do this work, don't take them to Hardwar, then the [other] village people will taunt us: 'You have put them in what Gayaji? You have put them in what Hardwar?' For this reason we do it.

INTERVIEWER: Do you have this belief, that after sinking them in Gayaji or Hardwar they will obtain *moksha?*

H: The belief is there, but no certain knowledge. But people say it is so, that release comes from sinking in Hardwar or Gaya.

W: Those who don't want to go, even so, if you offer them *piṇḍas* in Gaya they have to go. So we took our son's wife also and sank her in Gaya. And as long as she was alive she gave me only comfort. And since she died she has not even come to me once in a dream. She died one and one-half years ago. And when I sank the flowers in Gaya, I said, with my hands joined [in respect and supplication], 'When you were alive you gave me comfort; in this same way now give comfort.'

H: Look, it is the world's belief; the world accepts it but no one receives a written receipt. You have the *piṇḍas* offered, but you don't get a receipt stating, 'I received the *piṇḍas.*' If someone's mother and father die, and he does the rituals for twelve days and gives the Brahman a cow, grain, a rope, and a pitcher, he gives these; but he does not receive a written letter from his mother and father: 'The cow that you gave, we are drinking its milk. We are eating the grain and we are drinking from the well with the rope and the pitcher.' If you know of anyone who received such a written letter, tell me.

A contrast is apparent here between the wife's more simple and sincere belief in the efficacy of her pilgrimage and the husband's more restrained, somewhat skeptical approach. He later, apart from his wife, firmly denied inviting any deities from crossing places to attend his feast and declared himself unimpressed with the whole notion. Nevertheless, on the day of his celebration he declared the *bhāv* to be authentic.

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From the wife's comments the most immediate reason for their pilgrimage at this time emerged: they wanted to pacify the spirit of their son's first wife before bringing a second wife into the house. Thus they had brought the first wife's flowers to Gaya, around the neck of her eight-year-old son. By this means, and a very elaborate Celebration of Ganga, they thought to appease and remove her, forever. They also, of course, found an opportunity to display their not insignificant financial means and their elevated values. Considering their low-middle-caste rank, this couple was unusually concerned with performing rather ostentatious *dharma*.

These interview samples indicate something of the range of goals and the interweaving of gross and subtle, public and private, selfish and selfless reasons for the pilgrimage with flowers. In summary, those mentioned include: to maintain reputation and honor (avoiding taunts); to pay a 'debt' (*udhār, daṇḍ*) to the community by reciprocating feasts; to pay a 'debt' (*karj, urṇ*) established by *dharma* with respect to parents and ancestors; to remove spirits of the dead from the house (of both those who go readily and those whose departure is problematic); to help these spirits of dead kin to achieve peace or release; to benefit one's lineage by bringing Ganges Mother home. All these stated motivational strains mingle in the ritual action and play of the Celebration of Ganga. Although interviewees clearly did not consider fertility concerns a direct or appropriate reason for sinking flowers (as, by contrast, such concerns were for shrine pilgrimage), Gangotsav's rites and pageantry refer explicitly in several ways to auspicious reproduction. Among these references are the imagery of sprouts, water, and coconut pieces in the pouch, as well as the verses of some women's songs that accompany Celebration of Ganga. The role of Bhairuji is also, I will argue, of fertilizing significance.

The Celebration of Ganga held by the Kumavats who went on pilgrimage to pave the way for a replacement daughter-in-law's arrival in their household was the only opening of Ganges water that I observed which was not held in conjunction with a twelfth-day funeral feast. If flowers are not transported within the twelve days immediately following a death, not only may they be kept in the home for an indefinite period until an opportunity for pilgrimage arises, but the water brought back after they are taken may also then be stored until a special occasion demands or justifies its opening.[6] The majority of my fellow pilgrims were thus in no hurry to 'raise' their pots, except for these Kumavats.

About three months after our return from the pilgrimage to Puri, my research assistant and I received a hand-delivered invitation—a scrap of paper accompanied by the traditional grains of yellow rice—summoning us to an

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opening of Ganges water to be held by our fellow pilgrim Harzi Kumavat in his home village of Piplaj. When we reached Piplaj around 6:00 P.M. on the evening before that designated as Celebration of Ganga, we found quite elaborate arrangements in Harzi's clearly prosperous home. Several Brahman pandits were at work on a Sanskritic fire-oblation rite, and the ornate wooden chariot of the deity Thakurji, brought from Piplaj's Four-Arms Temple, was lodged in Harzi's courtyard beneath a festive canopy. Shortly after our arrival *ārati* was performed for Thakurji by the temple priest, who had accompanied his god's icon. By this time, Bhoju and I were thoroughly mystified: a postpilgrimage celebration to our knowledge never required fire oblations, and the presence of the temple god was even more puzzling. We were soon illuminated by our proud hosts. Harzi was holding his Celebration of Ganga along with the marriage of a pipal tree, growing in his yard, to the deity Thakurji. Five years previously, we learned, he had wed his basil plant to Thakurji. At that time he had also celebrated the marriages of his three daughters. Now he wished to sponsor the pipal's union as well. Along with this 'daughter' he was offering a dowry of goods and land whose profits would go into the Four-Arms treasury. Unspoken here but nonetheless obvious was the fait accompli of Harzi's son's new wife, who had already quietly taken up residence in the house.

The impressiveness of all this rather showy business was somewhat marred by a great deal of quarreling over minor amounts of money, resulting in the cancellation of a scheduled twenty-four-hour *Ramayana* reading and the nonparticipation of an expected *bhajan* party. Even so, the 'wedding' was held in a fairly grand fashion, and the Celebration of Ganga involved the usual songs, frolic, and festivity. It is noteworthy that the context of wedding versus funeral feast does virtually nothing to change the format of the events at Path Mother's shrine and on the road home. Thus, although the Gangotsav preparations and actions were somewhat mingled with the wedding business, they proceeded in a fashion almost identical to that for a funeral feast day.

In the night the usual invitation was given at the place of Path Mother by women of the house who desired to be possessed by Bhairuji. On this occasion, however, they actually called to him out loud. Although the pandit assured us that the fire-oblation rite was connected only with the wedding and had nothing to do with the Celebration of Ganga, nonetheless in its course the sealed pot of Ganges water was offered cloth and tied with multicolored string. Moreover, during the actual wedding ceremony when the couple (icon and tree) were knotted together, the multicolored string used for this purpose was run deliberately over a Shiva *lingam* covered with purple cloth and seated in

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a brass pot, and I was told that this was 'because Shiva always has the Ganges in his hair.' This indicated that the power of Ganges, flowing down through Shiva's 'ascetic-erotic' presence, was especially invoked for the benefit of the marital union.

Immediately following the conclusion of the wedding rites, Harzi carried his pilgrim's basket containing the Ganges-water pot and his walking stick to the place of Path Mother. A woman of his household came bearing a vessel with sprouts, and five other women brought vessels to receive Ganges water. Harzi was joined with his wife, and their grandson (the one whose mother had died and who had worn the flowers on our pilgrimage) was seated between them. Although a child, he actually held the position of chief mourner.

After the worship of Path Mother and her Bhairuji, the pot of Ganges water was taken from its basket and placed on the *pūjā* tray; rice was strewn over it, and it was bathed with water and tied with multicolored string. The Brahman pierced it, first watered Path Mother's sprouts, and then distributed a little water into each of the five waiting vessels. Harzi's sister performed *āratī*, and the vessels were placed on the heads of the women who had invited Bhairuji. Harzi received gifts of cloth from his wife's relations at this juncture.

The women with vessels circumambulated Path Mother and headed back toward Harzi's home. Only one of the five became possessed, and she was pacified and guided to the house by Harzi, who was sweeping the ground with his turban, bowing, and offering coconut pieces, which were placed in her pouch in the usual fashion. In the doorway she fell to her knees but rose and entered after being offered *dhūp*. When the vessel was taken from her head, a little water spilled out, and she seemed to stiffen and then swooned. She was quickly revived with a few ceremonial 'sprinkles' from the pot of undiluted Ganges water.

After this the feast food (*lapsī-puṛī*—cracked wheat and raw-sugar pudding with fried bread, served with watery but fiery hot potato curry) was offered to the deities present: Thakurji, Tulsi Mother, the pipal tree bride, and Harzi's other household gods. The guests were served next. Harzi told us that a little of the remaining Ganges water would be sprinkled on the food in the big cooking pots and the rest distributed among the guests as they sat in eating lines. He expressed his conviction that the *bhāv* that day was from the Ganges and no other place, but also said that it wouldn't matter if no *bhāv* came—the Ganges water still reached the house and could be served to the guests.[7]

Harzi Kumavat's Gangotsav was integrated into an unusual and ostentatious performance. The pandit who conducted the marriage of the pipal tree to Thakurji said that 'among one hundred or one thousand only one or

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two persons have done [such work]. This is the road of "merit" [*puṇya*] and nothing else at all.' Harzi himself had the usual reaction when we asked him what 'fruit' he might receive from this day's activities: 'God knows.' When further pressed, however, he was able to articulate at least some of his inner motivations rather effectively.

> Who knows? This is the debt [*udhār*] of my previous birth, This I can't say: what is the benefit or what isn't. [Harzi used benefit consistently although Bhoju and I in our questions used fruit.] I know and think that this—what is received—is the earning of a previous birth, Benefit? Look, when I was young I was very poor, I wasn't even married, and after I was married my mother and father died, so I was in much trouble. Now I am spending, and from spending no lack is coming. It is God's grace. People who don't do this work are just the same as I am.

Consistent with his stance during the pilgrimage, Harzi never alluded to the new daughter-in-law as in any way connected with his expensive and meritorious ritual undertakings; that was his wife's mundane concern. What he did express, however, was the conviction that his religious expenditures were somehow linked to his continued prosperity; equally strong was his denial of anything other than predetermined karmic causality for his good works. It is a rare person who would not thus disclaim any notion of deserving fruit or benefit that may result from undertakings such as a Ganges pilgrimage or 'religious gifting' (*dān*), including the gift of a daughter, whether vegetable or animal, in marriage. The ideology expressed by peasants on this subject is very like the *Gita's* in that acts are performed for their intrinsic worthiness and fruits are left 'in God's hands.' Here lies the major difference between pilgrimage to local shrines frankly made to wangle boons from the lesser deities, and pilgrimage to crossing places—that is, the difference between the ideologies of *jātrā* and *yātrā* in the broadest sense. Nonetheless, the Ganges pilgrimage process viewed as a whole, from departure through return celebration, does display certain motifs of fruitfulness. In the attempt to grasp this largely unspoken intentionality, women's songs once more provide sources of cultural meaning.

There exists a rather limited corpus called 'songs of Gangaji' or 'songs of Pathvari Ma' with a comparably limited context of performance. Some are sung on the way to and at the place of Path Mother, while others are special to the entrance of Ganges water into the village and explicitly aimed at stimulating the women carrying vessels to receive the *bhāv* of Ganga's Bhairu and to act, once possessed, in the expected ways.

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Richest in ritual imagery among Path Mother's songs is this one, usually sung on the way to or during that goddess's worship. Both returned pilgrims and those who have stayed behind will sing it, but the song appears to be, from the viewpoint of the latter, a welcome to homecomers.

Song of Path Mother 1

[1] Today my Gaya-dweller has come to the outskirts,[8]
Today my Gaya-dweller has come to the outskirts,
come showing a basket, O my Gaya Mother,
Dharaji's water overflows.
He came swaying-splashing, swaying-splashing, swaying-splashing,
swinging baskets on his shoulders,
in his hands a walking stick.
In the outskirts we'll greet him with green sprouted grasses,
at Pathvari we'll celebrate,
at Pathvari we'll welcome him with vessels,
And we'll cover Pathvari with flowers.

[2] Today my Gaya-dweller has come into the garden,
Today my Gaya-dweller has come to Pathvari.
He had Pathvari's worship done, O my Gaya Mother,
Dharaji's water overflows.
He came swaying-splashing, swaying-splashing, swaying-splashing,
swinging baskets on his shoulders,
in his hands a walking stick.
In the garden we'll greet him with green sprouted grasses,
at Pathvari we'll celebrate,
at Pathvari we'll welcome him with vessels,
And we'll cover Pathvari with flowers.

[3] Today my Gaya-dweller has entered the gateway,
Today my Gaya-dweller has crossed over the threshold.
He was fanned with eighty-four whisks, O my Ganga Mother,
Dharaji's water overflows.
He came swaying-splashing, swaying-splashing, swaying-splashing,
swinging baskets on his shoulders,
in his hands a walking stick.

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[4] Today my Gaya-dweller has come onto the porch,
Today my Gaya-dweller has come into the storeroom,[9]
as happy as a flowering vine, O my Ganga Mother,
Dharaji's water overflows.
He came swaying-splashing, swaying-splashing, swaying-splashing,
swinging baskets on his shoulders,
in his hands a walking stick.

The identity of the 'Gaya-dweller' (*Giyā-vāsī*) in this song is meaningfully ambiguous. Pictured is the returning pilgrim, carrying his basket replete with abundant Ganges water and his characteristic walking stick. But a pilgrim cannot really be a crossing-place-dweller, and thus the song actually addresses Mother Ganges herself and her Bhairuji, whose most common epithet is 'Banaras-dweller' (*Kāshī ko vāshī*). It might in fact be understood as positing an identity among the three. Returning pilgrims are traditionally greeted as deities, and their footdust is taken by elders and superiors.[10]

The most persistently repeated image in this song is that of bountiful Ganges water. It overflows from the pilgrim's basket, splashing like ocean waves, and this despite the fact that the container in a homecoming pilgrim's basket is actually always sealed and must remain sealed until Gangotsav. The overflowing of water occurs, of course, only then when the swaying *bhāv* drenches herself from the covered but not sealed clay vessel. Thus, although ostensibly addressing a returning male pilgrim, the song's most powerful imagery evokes the dramatic, homeward progression of the female *bhāv*. It may, however, be sung at the time of the worship of Path Mother when no water is opened, as well as at the Celebration of Ganga.

Other songs of Path Mother or Ganges Mother have for their main content the recitation of delicious treats to be prepared and offered to returning pilgrims and the deities that accompany them. Such promises of rich treats may appear in women's songs for almost any deity. One such song, notable for its rousing chorus, will suffice here. Although its words fete Ganges Mother and address Rama, this piece is most often performed during Bhairuji's possession of the water-carrying women.[11]

Song of Path Mother 2

[Refrain] Shout, shout, city people,
Shout victory to Ganga Ma!

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[1] Yes, O Rama, I will give you a high seat.
Shout victory to Ganga Ma!

[2] O Rama, the strong cow gives rich milk;
O Rama, I'll cook thick rice pudding.

[3] O Rama, I'll roll out lovely oil-bread;
O Rama, I'll cook thick rice pudding.

[4] O Rama, I'll boil bright rice;
O Rama, I'll add sugar by the handful.

[5] O Rama, I'll form firm round sweets;
O Rama, thirty or thirty-two treats.

[6] O Rama, I'll set out a handsome pitcher;
O Rama, the pitcher is filled with Ganges water.

Whereas the preceding songs are considered songs of Ganges Mother in the form of Path Mother, the following four are of Bhairuji. The first of these actually serves to summon and then addresses Bhairu's *bhāv* and is performed only on the return from Path Mother's shrine after the women have placed vessels with Ganges water on their heads. It has a special, intoxicating, typically eight-beat rhythm, usually accompanied by the drum, which is thought both to induce and to sustain possession. The *bhāv*'s apparently erratic but actually patterned and predictable actions on the way home from Path Mother's shrine are simultaneously described and provoked by the verses. The possessed women themselves do not sing or utter any intelligible sounds, but they sway and gasp or pant rhythmically. The verses vary, but the following compilation, taken from numerous recordings and eliminating countless repetitions, includes a good sampling of them. The first verse given here is the usual opening for this song; otherwise the order is not fixed.

Song of Ganga's Bhairu 1

[1] Golden Pathvari, O Mother, green sprouted grasses;
Green sprouted grasses, O Mother, sprouts drooping down.

[2] The watering-maid is clever, O Ganga's Bhairu,
clever, O Kashi-dweller;
Drink a cup of raw milk.

[3] On all four sides of Pathvari plays that Ganga's Bhairu,
plays that Kashi-dweller;
Drink a cup of raw milk.

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[4] He demands a sack of coconuts, that Ganga's Bhairu,
demands, that Kashi-dweller;
Drink a cup of raw milk.

[5] Dodging in the lanes plays Ganga's Bhairu,
plays Kashi-dweller;
Drink a cup of raw milk.

[6] If you are true, turn back,[12] Ganga's Bhairu,
turn back, Kashi-dweller;
Drink a cup of raw milk.

[7] If you are true, kneel down, Ganga's Bhairu,
kneel down, Kashi-dweller;
Drink a cup of raw milk.

[8] In the square rejoices that Ganga's Bhairu,
rejoices that Kashi-dweller;
Drink a cup of raw milk.

[9] A great number of sons were born too, O Ganga's Bhairu,
were born, Kashi-dweller;
Drink a cup of raw milk.

The last verse here is perhaps the most explicit statement in my data of the fertility concerns expressed on the occasion of Celebration of Ganga.[13] However, the nature of women's relation to Bhairuji, a deity who often bestows children, is portrayed in several songs as mutually seductive. The following is the least explicit in this sense, but it does establish a dialogue pattern that may be seen as more flirtatious in the next example. Like the first song of Path Mother, it primarily depicts a progression and procession of celebration from the village outskirts to the inside of a home. The logical order—from outskirts to home—in which the verses are presented is not necessarily the way they are sung, which appears from numerous recordings to be quite random, as does the correlation of locale with caste.

Song of Ganga's Bhairu 2

[1] Barber-girl, your house is on the road,
mine is a hut beneath the *nīm*.[14]
Kashi-dweller will come and be jubilant on the village outskirts.

[2] Merchant-girl, your house is in the lanes,
mine is a hut beneath the *nīm*.
Kashi-dweller will come and joke on the village outskirts.

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On the road the dust will fly,
and on the village outskirts there'll be celebration.

[3] Gardener-girl, your house is in the lanes,
mine is a hut beneath the *nīm*.
Ganga's Bhairu will come and be jubilant on the village outskirts.

[4] Potter-girl, your house is in the lanes,
mine is a hut beneat the *nīm*.
Kashi-dweller will come and be jubilant at Pathvari.

[5] Drummer-girl, your house is in the lanes,
mine is a hut beneath the *nīm*.
Ganga's Bhairu will come and be jubilant in the gateway.

[6] Brahman-girl, your house is in the lanes,
mine is a hut beneath the *nīm*.
Kashi-dweller will come and be jubilant in your house.

Striking here, as well as in the following song of Ganga's Bhairu, is the series of different caste names with which each verse is repeated. Path Mother is said to belong to the whole village and to no particular caste. As one informant put it: 'No one can say that he has personal authority over her, because, with the exception of Bhangis [Harijans], all the castes go: Rajputs, Banyas, Brahmans, and so forth. She belongs to the whole village, and not to any single community.' These songs confirm this. Although usually sung on an occasion dominated by a single caste (of the celebrant), they nonetheless incorporate many caste names. The next refers not only to various castes but to some of their characteristic services. It has a definite erotic undertone that is in keeping with Bhairuji's reputation in village lore as a womanizer, and is revealing of the erotic-procreative content of the whole Path Mother and Ganges-water ritual complex.

Song of Ganga's Bhairu 3

[Refrain] You made me lose sleep, lose sleep, O Bhairu,
You got me excited.
I brought my companions here with care, O Kashi-dweller,
I brought them, O Ganga's Bhairu.

[1] I'm a Brahman's daughter, you are Ganga's Bhairu.
If you say so, I'll bring a blanket and a mattress,

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O Kashi-dweller
I'll bring them, O Ganga's Bhairu.

[2] I'm a Potter's daughter, you are Ganga's Bhairu.
If you say so, I'll bring a double set of pots,
O Kashi-dweller,
I'll bring them, O Ganga's Bhairu.

[3] I'm a Gardener's daughter, you are Ganga's Bhairu.
If you say so, I'll bring flower-garlands,
O Kashi-dweller,
I'll bring them, O Ganga's Bhairu.

[4] I'm a Servant's daughter, you are Ganga's Bhairu.
If you say so, I'll fan you,
O Kashi-dweller,
I'll fan you, O Ganga's Bhairu.
[The song may continue, mentioning other caste names and appropriate gifts or services.]

In village talk it is common to allude to women's unfulfilled sexual desires by speaking of their insomnia. This song of Bhairuji thus rather explicitly poses a sexual attraction, a longing if not a consummation, between female devotee and masculine deity. With no attempt to probe the complex history of Bhairu's mythology, some of his relevant character traits may be briefly mentioned here. Above all he is an instrumental, grossly active deity. He is also markedly unpaired, unattached. While the women of Rajasthan sing many romantic songs about the pairs of Shiva and Parvati, Sita and Rama, Radha and Krishna, Bhairuji has no mate and appears to be a kind of midnight rambler. He comes to his female devotees' houses in the dead of night and tries by various ruses to persuade them to let him in. If they do not, he sometimes curses them. He is attractive, seductive, and a little dangerous, like lightning and thunder as evoked in the next song. Although addressed to Kala-Gora Bhairu[15] rather than Kashi-dweller, this song was in fact recorded at the place of Path Mother, not during Gangotsav but on a night when a group of pilgrims returned.

Song of Kala-Gora Bhairu

[Refrain] Bhairu, on your head a cap is sparkling:
What do I think? Lightning flashes, my Kala-Gora Bhairu.
Bhairu, on your waist silver bells are ringing:

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What do I think? It is Lord Inder's thunder, my
Kala-Gora Bhairu.

[1] Bhairu, on the road to Inder's throne a Brahman girl
is calling,
my Kala-Gora Bhairu;
That Brahman girl is calling,
my very juicy[16] Bhairu.

[The same words repeat substituting, in my recording, the following caste names: Gardener, Wine seller, Washerwoman, Potter, and Rajput.]

The outspoken final line of the first song of Bhairuji and the flirtatious dialogues of the second, third, and fourth point to an interpretation of Gangotsav's pageantry as reproductive. This interpretation leads back to themes of the transformation of death into life through fertility expressed in women's play. The colorful and festive atmosphere of Gangotsav, difficult to convey in black and white, has much to do with female exuberance. But here—as is not the case on Calf Twelfth—exuberant women happily tolerate the close proximity of males.

For a big feast, guests will be invited from as many as twenty or thirty villages in the area, and such occasions are prime opportunities among the young for flirtation and the formation of other more serious liaisons. Crowds of pretty girls, clustered in companionable groups, are dressed in their best and brightest red and yellow and vivid turquoise clothing, their wraps decorated with spangles stitched in whorl, star, or flower designs. All wear heavy silver ornaments on their ankles, necks, and arms, and shiny *lākh* bangles studded with rhinestones. Aggressively they surge and push in the area surrounding the *bhāvs*—those women carrying pots of Ganges water on their heads and possessed by Kashi-dweller—singing encouragement and delight. The women participating as *bhāvs*, although they retain their modesty by keeping their faces hidden, become the center of public attention. They may, and indeed should, act in balky, teasing, demanding ways unbecoming to women, and are not to be criticized for such deportment. Quite the contrary, they are reverently placated and honored as deities, for they are vehicles of Bhairuji; like Bhairu's source, Lord Shiva, they bear on their heads the force of Ganges Mother's arrival in the 'world of mortality' (*mṛtyulok*).

The decorous ritual at Path Mother's shrine is performed by a Brahman male for the benefit of a male worshipper (preferably joined with his mate). But

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it is women who plant and water the sprouts, sing the songs of Path Mother and Bhairuji, invite Kashi-dweller to possess them, place the pots of Ganges water on their heads, receive the *bhāv* of Bhairuji, and indulge in his teasing play. Calf Twelfth's 'jokes' involved females' appropriation of male goat play—billy goats' mating cries and postures. Possession on Gangotsav is similarly of a transsexual nature: women become the ultramale deity Bhairuji. As on Calf Twelfth, the predicted result is the birth of sons. Moreover, the *bhāv* moves forward, ultimately, only when coconut pieces are placed in her pouch, recalling the shrine rite of pouch-filling with a coconut in order to induce conception.

Thus the transformation from death to life, effected through the exchange of flowers for Ganges water, is consummated at Gangotsav in a sexually tinged performance motivated by fertility concerns. Women's innate power might be represented by clay waterpots, carried sedately in everyday fashion. But when he possesses the water-carrying women, Bhairuji's juicy masculinity sets them in rhythmic motion and soaks their garments. The water is delivered to the house of the celebrant—and placed in the dark, inner room—charged with the immediate, loosened, available potency of union between Bhairu and the possessed woman, as well as with Ganges Mother's boundless life force. At the feast which soon follows, this water is consumed by all the assembled caste-fellows of the deceased.

Some informants hold that the *bhāv* of Gangotsav is truly Bhairuji's, invited by pilgrims at the Ganges and brought home as an honored guest who will bring general well-being (including fertility) to the celebrant's household. Others, and this is not an uncommon opinion, say that in this decadent age the gods hardly bother to visit human habitations. The action of Gangotsav, they declare, is merely the sport, the play, the intoxication of women for their own amusement.

Whatever people may say—and we have seen how skeptical they are about the fruits of Ganges pilgrimage in general—they nonetheless choose to perform both the journey to sink flowers and the return celebration if they have or can scrape together the wherewithal. All the interviewees cited—even those who declared its meaninglessness in no uncertain terms—were either doing or had done the pilgrimage with flowers and had performed or planned to perform the Celebration of Ganga.

While stated motivations for the pilgrimage with flowers range from fulfillment of social and biomoral debts to securing release for the spirits of the dead, and unstated motivations have been suggested in terms of communal fertility and regeneration, the rationale for pilgrimage *without* flowers is far

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less penetrable. In a superficial light, the *darshan* pilgrimage is often frankly treated as wandering for selfish if harmless pleasure: *ghūmnā.* Yet it is also claimed to be a journey toward knowledge and freedom, partaking of the bliss of soul-cleansing waters and countless viewings of the great gods. Negatively, the indiscriminate wandering of pilgrims from crossing place to crossing place may be equated with the benighted, wasteful, and condemned sojourning of ghosts: *baṭhaknā.* Better than outer journeying, say unlettered housewives as well as esoteric teachers, is the inner pilgrimage. Within the self, subtle knowledge, real release, unlimited *darshan* may be found.

Notes

1. Given the Nath caste's alternative and potent means of securing release for the deceased through worship of Hing Laj Ma Pūjā, a Nath informant might be expected to place less stock in sinking flowers. However, members of several other peasant castes expressed similar skepticism toward the soteriological benefits of the pilgrimage with flowers.

2. The three debts, according to Manu, are 'to the great sages, to the manes, and to the gods' (G. Buhler, *The Laws of Manu*, New York, 1969: 169). The debt to the sages is fulfilled by studying the Vedas, to the ancestors by begetting sons, and to the gods by offering sacrifices (Buhler 1969:205). According to informants, the reason for begetting sons is that they may perform *shrāddha,* or 'faithful offerings,' on behalf of the ancestors. From this derives the interpretation that performing *shrāddha* in pilgrimage centers in fact fulfills the debt to the forefathers. In the idea of this debt, concern with procreation and attentions to the dead are once again closely linked.

3. He used the word 'bones' rather than the usual euphemistic 'flowers.' Moreoever, the verb I have translated 'rinse' is none of the several polite terms normally employed for sinking flowers but rather that commonly used for rinsing laundry by sloshing it about in the water.

4. Kumavats are potters who don't make pots but are predominantly landowning agriculturalists. This couple's Gangotsav is described below.

5. Dev Uṭhaṇī Gyāras falls on the bright eleventh of Kartik (October–November). Four months before this, on Dev Sovaṇī Gyāras (Gods Going-to-Sleep Eleventh, which falls on the bright eleventh of Asharh [June–July]), all the deities are said to fall asleep or to descend to the underworld. Between these dates no weddings may be performed. This period could hardly be described, however, as one of ritual inactivity, as several of the year's more important festivals take place within its span.

6. I heard several wondrous stories about pots of Ganges water that had been placed within a wall and plastered over for security. A new generation in the house

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might not know the exact location of the pot but would know of its existence. Once they made the decision to hold Gangotsav and began to search for the water, a small stream would come trickling out through the plastered wall of its own accord, indicating the hiding place. When the pot was retrieved, its seal, needless to say, would still be intact.

7. I witnessed Gangoj perhaps a dozen times, and only once did the *bhāv* totally fail to come. This occasion marked a particularly unhappy death—a young woman who had died in pregnancy, leaving behind four small children. Her funeral rites were performed meticulously and elaborately because it was felt that she was very likely to become a lingering ghost. A *bhajan* party was called at great expense all the way from Jaipur, and a much-reputed pandit was imported from a nearby town to read the *Garuda Purana.* However, people explained to me that it would not have been proper for the *bhāv* to come, as it was not an occasion for happiness and revelry (nor perhaps for evoking fertility).

8. The word I translate as 'outskirts' is *kānkar*; it refers to the outer, uninhabited limits of village land.

9. By 'storeroom' I translate *auvaryā*, always described as a dark, window-less, inner room. It may be the place where the water vessel is set after removing it from the *bhāv's* head; its womb-like quality should reinforce the interpretation that follows.

10. Based on the shoulder-basket image, a few informants indentified the returning pilgrim described in this song with Shravan Kumar, the legendary devoted son who attempted to carry his living but blind parents to Banaras in a pair of shoulder baskets and who is, in village tradition, worshipped as an ideal brother on the day of Raksha Bandhan ('Tying On Protection'). This holiday, more commonly known as Rakhi (the term for the decorative wristbands that play such an important part in the festival) arrives on the full-moon day of the month of Shravan (July–August). On this day the stylized image of Shravan Kumar with his two big shoulder baskets is drawn on the wall beside the doorway of every home and then worshipped. A similar picture may be drawn in the home of a returning pilgrim. The association of the song image of shoulder baskets full of water, and the story and wall picture with shoulder baskets containing parents, supports an interpretation of the Ganges pilgrimage as an exchange of ancestors' remains and souls for fertilizing Ganges water; of flowers (bones) for flowers (sons).

11. The possessing agent is said to be Bhairuji, but the possession is regarded by worshippers in many ways as coming from the major deity—Mother Ganges. An 'O Rama' like this one is often explained by villagers as a harmonic or rhythmic device.

12. The idea here is that the 'true' *bhāv* will not docilely walk to the house but will always act in a contrary fashion.

13. Ganges water is, however, a source of fertility in other Rajasthani lore.

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14. Bhairuji shrines are often located beneath *nīm* trees, and *nīm* leaves are a suitable offering to that deity.

15. Kālā-Gorā translates as 'black-fair.' Often represented as two figures, identical except for their complexions and instruments, Kala-Gora Bhairu may be addressed in song and *bhajan* as a single being.

16. 'Very juicy' is a literal translation of *gaṇā rasīlā*. It may connect both to the rain imagery of the song and to semen.

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Separate Domains

Hinduism, Politics, and Environmental Pollution

Kelly D. Alley

Religion and politics are areas of dynamic interchange in India. In fact, the nexus between religion and politics has proved so convincing that analysts of Indian politics, society, and religion have focused exclusively on the successes of these interchanges. By doing so, they have neglected to mention areas of conflict and debate in which religion and politics are deliberately held apart. While doing field research in northern India in 1995–1996, I began to think about why religious and political leaders were not coming together over a particular issue in which I had great interest, the pollution of the river Gaṅgā. These leaders were failing to create any social, moral, or political valence for the call to 'save' or 'protect' their sacred river Gaṅgā from material pollution. Likewise, the Government of India, after spending millions of rupees in its first environmental program to 'clean' the river, had not motivated the public to participate in cleaning activities.

Given the dynamic interchanges associated with the struggle to control sacred spaces in northern India, this paper asks: why do many Hindu religious leaders avoid connecting their spiritual or organizational agendas to the ideology of combating river pollution? This chapter begins with a case from the colonial period in which Indian nationalists and Hindu religious leaders agitated to prevent government exploitation of the river Gaṅgā. I use this example to show how the historical precedent of connecting political and religious ideologies was a short-lived one that has not inspired momentum in this direction in the contemporary period. Then I outline discussions with contemporary religious leaders and ritual specialists to explain why they are not concerned with the problem of environmental pollution, and river pollution in particular.

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Made conspicuous by public rallies and auspicious events, the connections between religion and politics dramatize the transformations taking place in Indian society today. The religious symbolism infusing political contests casts new meaning on the identity of the nation-state and the population groups that occupy it. In the politicization of religious events, secular narratives and political rhetoric are used to give legitimacy to religious claims and the meaning of sacred space. Through this political symbolism is reflected the rapprochement of religious and political leaders—leaders who, in recent struggles to define and possess sacred territory, have joined hands to expand their respective audiences.[1]

The religious organization Visva Hindu Parisad (VHP), or World Hindu Organization, stands out in recent interchanges. Picking up on an old conflict, the VHP has called upon Hindus in India and abroad to support a movement to repossess several sacred sites colonized by Muslims in the precolonial period. In 1984, they vowed to destroy three places of Muslim worship: Babri Masjid in Ayodhya, Gyanvapi Mosque in Varanasi (Banaras), and Shahi Idgah in Mathura. On those spots, they pledged to build Hindu temples. During the 1990s, the VHP joined hands with the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), a political party that had little strength in Parliament and state governments at the time. With the support of VHP members, the BJP increased its representation in state and central governments from 1991 through 1998, and assumed control of the central government for thirteen days in 1996. Again in 1998, they formed the ruling party at the center.[2] Combining their networks to some extent, the VHP and the BJP have championed the cause of *Hindutva*, or Hindu nationalism.

During the early 1990s, as the VHP and BJP stepped up their conflict in Ayodhya, political and cultural reporting on South Asia voiced concern for the potentially dangerous nexus developing between religion and politics. Consequently, scholars were drawn into debates on the nature of secularism and communalism.[3] As the scholastic focus intensified, analysts of Indian politics, society, and religion grew more interested in what brings religious and political leaders together in conflict than in the processes that keep them apart. While doing field research in New Delhi in 1995–1996, I began to think about the differences between this religious-political movement to claim sacred space and the environmental movement to save or clean the river Gaṅgā. Since both involved a revisioning of Hindu faith and ritual to some degree, I wondered why religious and political leaders were not riding the waves of the fledgling environmental movement. I thought about the differences between

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these movements rather nervously as I watched the VHP step up its campaign to destroy the other two Muslim places of worship on its agenda (they had already destroyed the mosque in Ayodhya).[4] I saw that issues defining river pollution in India had an unmined potency that both religious and political leaders could appropriate for their own ends. For instance, an opposition political party might refer to the failures of the Ganga Action Plan as a way to attack the political legitimacy of the Congress Party. Or, religious leaders could mobilize their followers by pointing an accusing finger at Muslim tanners who dump industrial waste into the river. Yet neither these nor other kinds of appropriations had been made.

The symbolic dissonance between religious and environmentalist worldviews is a complex one in India and is partly responsible for the distance between religious and political leaders in this field. I wrote a detailed article in 1998 on the semantic complexity of the terms purity and pollution to outline this symbolic dissonance.[5] Taking a specific group of religious practitioners, I argued that the pilgrim priests, or *paṇḍās*, of Daśāśvamedha Ghāṭ in Banaras were making a distinction between purity and cleanness when considering the impact that wastewater flows was having on their sacred river Gaṅgā. They explained that Mother Gaṅgā could unfortunately become unclean (*asvaccha* or *gandā*), but that she could never be impure (*aśuddha* or *apavitra*). For these *paṇḍās*, the river Gaṅgā is a goddess who possesses the power to absorb and absolve human and worldly impurities. In a fashion cited in the *Viṣṇu Purāṇa*, she is able to wash over the impurities of the world like she washed over the foot of Lord Viṣṇu on her descent to earth (*Bhāgavata Purāṇa* 5.17.1). Using this transcendent power in the contemporary context, Gaṅgā can stave off the degeneration of contemporary society without defiling herself. Remaining pure and fertile, she is worshiped by devotees and pilgrims through ablutions, meditation, and worship (*snān*, *dhyān*, and *pūjā*).[6]

Over a period of three years, I was able to witness the reactions of pilgrim priests of Daśāśvamedha to government pollution prevention schemes. Whenever government officials made public claims about pollution in the river, the priests would look askance, muttering that government officials actually create the 'pollution' they claim to control. Openly opposed to government bureaucracy, these Banaras *paṇḍās* associated scientific techniques for 'cleaning' the river with the corruption and inefficiency of government and distrusted both the theories and the officials who espoused them. Yet, while noticeably antistate, their criticisms seldom extended to industrialists, such as tanners or other large company executives. Focusing only occasionally on

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the irritations produced by local fish markets and slaughter houses, whose immorality and unpleasantness they deplored, they had more vigor in their denunciation of government officials and bureaucrats.[7] This was reflected in their view that industrial effluent, though not distinguished in terms of toxins or heavy metals, was considered only a bit more dangerous (*hānikārak*) than household and city waste. Household, city, and industrial wastewater together created the dirtiness, or *gandagī*, that Gaṅgā was forced to carry away. These forms were just as worrisome as *pān* (betel nut) spit and uncremated bodies; in fact, the latter two were more commonly cited as problematic for everyday life.[8]

Despite their disdain for government, fish markets, and slaughter houses, pilgrim priests at Daśāśvamedha have shown little interest in 'cleaning' the sacred river. Certainly, the notion of environmental pollution has no 'fit' in their Hindu worldview and little currency in local political debates.[9] Moreover, the ideology of environmental cleanliness is potentially subversive to the ideology of purity upon which a pilgrim priest's own position of authority rests. But this does not mean, as others have suggested, that Banaras residents are simply blind to waste problems.[10] They are, in fact, acutely aware of the wastewater situation in their own neighborhood and highly critical of pollution prevention schemes. The absence of purity rhetoric, therefore, does not reflect a lack of concern for the suffering brought about by dirty drains, solid waste, and general uncleanliness. Rather, the disjunction points to an occupational predicament: while depending upon a vital divine Gaṅgā, they cannot actively engage in 'saving' her material form. In other words, while encouraging Hindu pilgrims to respect Gaṅgā's grace, they can neither ask them to consider her fall from grace nor take up the higher power to control, or 'clean,' her.

In 1995, while researching interpretations of environmental pollution in Uttar Pradesh, I met an environmental activist who wanted to make connections with VHP leaders in New Delhi, hoping they would adopt a call to save the sacred river Gaṅgā from material pollution. The Kanpur activist was successful at getting VHP leaders in New Delhi to include this message as a theme of a pilgrimage rally held in 1995. However, during the actual processions, the message was never publicized. In effect a nonstarter, the issue failed to attract the attention of leaders of the VHP or members of other religious organizations. There was no apparent political valence latent in or created by the call to 'save' or 'protect' Gaṅgā from pollution.

The conceptual dissonance between the Hindu worldview and the view of contemporary environmentalism and the absence of instrumental

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appropriations or revisions of the concept of Gaṅgā's sacred purity might, therefore, lead to the conclusion that in modern history religious and political leaders have never simultaneously exploited the symbolism of Gaṅgā's purity. However, a case from the colonial period demonstrates that religious and political leaders once joined hands to defend rhetorically Gaṅgā's purity. Almost a century ago, Indian nationalists opposed the colonial government's plan to arrest and redirect the Gaṅgā near the sacred city of Haridwar. Arguing that Gaṅgā's essence and purifying power would be altered by any kind of canal engineering, they rallied around the demand to ensure her unobstructed flow past the sacred spots of Haridwar.

Given the explosive conflicts over sacred spaces today, what makes Gaṅgā's purity different from the sociality of sacred space in the eyes of Hindu religious leaders and ritual specialists such as *paṇḍās?* To provide a historical contrast, I would like to outline how the issue of Gaṅgā's purity was coopted by the political movement to resist colonial rule. Data for this historical analysis are drawn from documents and records of the Irrigation Department of the colonial government of India and from colonial gazetteers. Following this, I examine data collected from interviews with religious leaders, ritual specialists, and members of religious organizations during field visits from 1994 through 1996. These interviews, held during important religious festivals, such as the Māgha Melā in Allahabad, Kārtik Pūrṇimā in Banaras, and during *yajña, pūjā,* and *āratī* on the banks of the Gaṅgā, contain references that shed light on the contemporary distance between religious and political leaders in this topical field.

Purity and unobstructed flow

I begin with colonial politics. By 1916, a conflict between colonial officials of the Irrigation Department of the United Provinces and leaders of the Indian independence movement had reached a crescendo. Led by Pandit Mohan Malaviya, a leader of the movement for self rule, this conflict drew the support of Hindu religious leaders, nationalists, princes, and intellectuals across India, taking place in the less visible corridors of the Irrigation Department and in correspondence and meetings between Indian leaders and British irrigation officers. Indian leaders were objecting to the colonial government's attempts to modify a project that partially diverted the river Gaṅgā to agricultural fields in the Doab, the alluvial tableland lying between the valleys of the Gaṅgā and

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Yamuna Rivers in northern India. Arguing that Gaṅgā's sacred purity was associated with the power of her flow, Indian leaders opposed the government's plans, using rhetoric that demanded her unobstructed flow.[11]

The site of this conflict was Haridwar. For Hindus, Haridwar is the gateway to the earth for Mother Gaṅgā. It is where she descended from heaven on the locks of Lord Śiva to relieve human suffering and purify souls. Earlier names for this place, such as Kapilā, suggest that this site has been connected with Gaṅgā's descent from heaven for centuries. The early Muslim chroniclers Abu Rihan and Rashid-ud-din of the Moghul period and Hiuen Tsang, a seventh-century traveler, also mentioned Gaṅgā-dwāra, or the gateway to Gaṅgā.[12] Historically, both Śaivites (followers of Śiva) and Vaiṣṇavites (followers of Viṣṇu) have worshiped at Haridwar and have developed different meanings of the city and its sacred spaces over time. Śaivites spell the city Hardwar and consider it the abode of Śiva (or Har), while Vaiṣṇavites call it Haridwar, the home of Viṣṇu (or Hari) This paper will use Haridwar, the official name of the city today.

Har-kī-paurī Ghāṭ, situated on the western bank of the Gaṅgā, lies within the center of the sacred space of Haridwar.[13] At the base of the steps that form this *ghāṭ* is Brahmā Kuṅḍ, the spot where Brahmā arranged the descent of mother Gaṅgā to Earth. Brahmā Kuṅḍ is filled with the nectar of immortality, the nectar that fell from the primordial jug the gods wrestled away from the demons.[14] The *ghāṭ* leading to this sacred *kuṇḍ* is known today as Har-kī-paurī, Hari-kī-pairī, or Hari-kā-caraṇ. Alternatively privileging Śiva and Viṣṇu, the first name means Śiva's door, while the latter two mean Viṣṇu's foot.

Against the backdrop of this eternal sacredness, we find that the material shape of Har-kī-paurī Ghāṭ has changed significantly over the past two centuries. In 1828, Walter Hamilton commented that the *ghāṭ* was a narrow passage carved out of a steep mountain with 'room for only four persons to pass abreast.'[15] In this period, several fatal incidents occurred in the narrow passage. In 1819, 430 persons, including British sepoys, were crushed to death as thousands pushed to bathe in the Gaṅgā on the most auspicious day of the Kuṃbha Melā. After the stampede, the British Government expanded the access way to one hundred feet and increased the *ghāṭ* to sixty steps.[16] When the Śrī Gaṅgā Sabha was established in 1916, this organization took control of maintaining the *ghāṭ* for pilgrims and enforced rules for public behavior. Shoes, cameras, and cooking equipment were not allowed on the *Ghāṭ*, and soap or oil could not be used while bathing in the stream. Later, the Municipal Committee constructed a cement platform, connected to Har-kī-paurī Ghāṭ by two foot bridges, to allow pilgrims to congregate on the other side of Brahmā Kuṅḍ.

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Hamilton's nineteenth-century description of the river landscape at Haridwar gives some detail about the nature of Gaṅgā's flow past this sacred site. At that time, the Gaṅgā flowed through several channels that lay a mile across an open gorge. One channel, departing from the main stream two and one-fourth miles above Haridwar, flowed past Haridwar and the pilgrimage places of Mayapur and Kankhal before rejoining the parent river.

On this branch of the Gaṅgā, the Government of India harnessed the river's flow and created the Upper Ganges Canal. Modeled on the Eastern Jumna Canal built in the 1830s, Colonel Proby Cautley followed a path demarcated over two centuries earlier by Ali Mardan Khan, a minister of Shah Jahan, and charted out the route for the canal on horseback. The canal was to provide relief to a dry tableland which, lying at an elevation of nine hundred feet above sea level, was prone to drought.

After completing the survey work, Cautley was appointed by the Government of the United Provinces to supervise the construction of the canal from headquarters in Roorkee. Cautley, an engineer and military officer, opened the canal for irrigation in 1855 and then ordered the construction of offshoots and distributors to widen its reach. The colonial government, however, did not begin to reap the rewards until over a decade later, well after Cautley had been charged with overspending. By the turn of the twentieth century, the Upper Ganges Canal had become the lifeline for the Doab.[17]

Negotiating the canal works

After the opening of the Ganges canal in 1855, several engineering problems developed, requiring officials to close the plant every year for maintenance work. Because the canal head at Mayapur stood at a higher ground level than the main stream of the Gaṅgā, the flow in the sacred stream (the supply channel) was slower. This caused boulders and shingle to settle and block the headworks downstream. At the end of every rainy season in September and October, the Irrigation Department had to clear the boulders and shingle by diverting the entire flow of the river away from the branch stream and the irrigation canal. Without river water to fill Brahmā Kuṇḍ in front of Har-kī-paurī Ghāṭ, pilgrims could not perform the ablutions that were central to their pilgrimage. Closing the canal also proved problematic for farmers who required water for standing *kharīf* (autumnal) crops and sowing winter crops.[18]

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In 1909, engineers of the Irrigation Department of the United Provinces developed plans to create permanent works at Bhimgoda, above Har-kī-paurī Ghāṭ, to regulate the flow of water into the supply channel. Without informing the public of their plans, officials assured the local Brahman priests, or *paṇḍās*, that the work would ensure an increased flow of the Gaṅgā past Har-kī-paurī Ghāṭ year round. While the priests were convinced and raised no opposition, some resistance was raised by a small organization for Hindu nationalist unity, the All-India Hindu Sabha. Their concerns, however, had no effect on the government's plans.[19]

Work began in 1912, but two years later government officials radically modified the plan to create a canal headworks at another site. In the new plan, the government proposed building a masonry dam across the main stream of the Gaṅgā and constructing a regulator with gates above that dam to divert water to the supply channel. To do this, they proposed digging a new channel across Laljiwala Island, a stretch of land lying between the supply channel and the main stream of the Gaṅgā. Officials of the Irrigation Department speculated that this new regulator would control the flow of the river into the original supply channel and help prevent high floods. It would also reduce shoaling and ensure an adequate supply of water for irrigation in the months of September and October.

Officials advocating this revision failed to anticipate the reaction of the Hindu community. Unimpressed by the projected benefits of canal irrigation, many Hindu leaders opposed the government's new plan. In a public meeting at Haridwar on 5 June 1914, the local Hindu community expressed alarm at the projected works and laid down their demand for an uninterrupted flow of the Gaṅgā past Har-kī-paurī Ghāṭ.[20] But, in spite of their demands, the Government of India moved ahead and sanctioned the expenditure for the revised plan.

As the government dismissed the protests of the Hindu community, the agitation, fueled by demands for self rule, gained momentum. When the colonial government could ignore their demands no longer, Sir James Meston, the lieutenant governor of the United Provinces, convened a meeting of Hindu leaders to discuss the issue. The meeting, held on 5 November 1914, was attended by public figures from various parts of the vast subcontinent. The maharaja of Jaipur, a minister of the maharaja of Alwar, the maharaja of Darbhanga, Justice Chatterjee of the Calcutta High Court, Lala Sukbir Sinha (secretary of the All-India Hindu Sabha), Mahant Lakshman Das of the Sikh Gurudwara, Dehradun, and several engineers were present.[21] During this meeting, the representatives made several decisions that were later announced in a communique.

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Appearing to waver under pressure from the Hindu community, the government agreed to keep the opening to the supply channel free from any blockade or sluice, even though some shoaling would result and would have to be cleared annually. They also agreed to keep a 'free opening' in the weir over the main stream of the Gaṅgā to provide an unobstructed supply of water for bathers. Responding to their demand that the new supply channel not take on 'the name or the appearance of a canal,' colonial officials assured the public that the new supply channel would be cut 'naturally' out of Laljiwala Island. To do this, engineers agreed to refrain from lining the canal with masonry.

The commitments spelled out in the communique were vague in several respects and avoided mentioning that work designed under the original plan was, in fact, already underway. Suspicious about the government's assurances, Pandit Malaviya insisted that the maharaja of Jaipur write a letter to Meston suggesting that plans to build both the regulator and the new feeder channel be shelved. Then Malaviya and the maharaja of Jaipur called other ruling princes into the agitation. Another public meeting was held in Haridwar on 4 September 1916. At that time participants expressed their regret that the Irrigation Department's assurances were not upheld. Copies of the resolutions from this meeting were sent to the maharajas of Udaipur, Jaipur, Mysore, Travancore, Indore, Bikaner, Alwar, Gwalior, Jammu and Kashmir, and Darbhanga. The All-India Hindu Sabha was also notified.

At this time, the *paṇḍās* of Har-kī-paurī created an organization to promote their interests. This organization, the Sri Ganga Hindu Sabha, also submitted its regret to the Government of India. In a separate correspondence, Malaviya and other maharajas, rajas, former judges, and *śaṅkārācarya*s convinced Meston to communicate their concerns to the Government of India. When Meston wrote his letter of 5 February 1917, he warned the government against violating Hindu sentiment:

> It is necessary to face the fact that Hindu sentiment was not consulted before these works were determined on, that it is extraordinarily powerful in all matters concerning the sacred stream at Hardwar and that the agitation—engineered and dishonest though much of it is—has penetrated and if unchecked will further penetrate vast depths of Hindu sentiment, which it would be most inexpedient to array against Government at any time and more especially at present.[22]

Through Meston, the Hindu community pushed the Government of India to abandon the construction of the regulator and the other canal headworks leading to the new supply channel above Har-kī-paurī. They also

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demanded that an opening of at least thirty feet be kept in the weir across the main stream of the Gaṅgā. Calling the protests irrational, officials argued that Hindu demands ran counter to the needs for flood protection and irrigation. 'Unobstructed flow,' as Sir James Meston put it, 'was stretched to mean much that would be inconvenient.'[23]

Nevertheless, Meston decided to accommodate the opposition by convening another conference in Haridwar on 18 and 19 December 1916. He invited the All-India Hindu Sabha, the Ganga Hindu Sabha of Haridwar, and those who had attended earlier meetings on the issue. The maharaja of Jaipur brought along his own contingent of ruling princes and their technical adviser, a retired British chief engineer of the Punjab. After taking a tour of the canal works, Meston sought the opinions of those present and recorded them. Malaviya, who was the most articulate of the group, claimed that participants of the 1914 conference had misunderstood the government's decisions. He argued that they had believed the new channel running from the regulator to the original supply channel would not bear the appearance of a canal. They had also expected the weir across the main stream to have an opening without shutters to allow the free and unfettered flow of the Gaṅgā. Since the government had disregarded both these points by lining the canal and constructing a shutter in the weir, he graciously submitted that perhaps the Hindu community had misinterpreted the government's intentions. The Hindu community expected a larger opening in the weir, to permit enough water to maintain the river stream all the way to Allahabad. Malaviya pleaded:

> From the discussion which has appeared in the papers it is clear that people want a sufficient opening so that they can bathe. It must be wide enough to let a sufficient stream through. Thousands of people bathe along the course of the river. The opening must be so wide that all places below it will receive pure water. People seem to be dissatisfied with the Regulator. Possibly there was a misunderstanding both on the part of those who were present in 1914 and the outside public. It is important to remove this dissatisfaction in view of the holiness of the river. Even if some extra cost is incurred the feeling of the people should be soothed. It is said that the agriculturists will suffer if the volume of water that passes into the canal is reduced, but no Hindu would place his material prosperity above the dictates of his conscience and his religion. In his opinion a five feet opening was not enough. Five to ten lakhs of bathers come to tiraths. They come from great distances and undergo great discomforts. But they will stand any trouble because it is a matter of faith. Even if the cost were one lakh or two lakhs, that should not matter when it was a question of belief with the people. This must be borne in mind. They believe that the Ganges makes people pure and removes sin.[24]

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The government strongly disagreed with the option of maintaining a permanent opening in either weir or regulator, citing the problem of shoaling and the danger of flooding. Nevertheless, Meston was eager to forge a compromise and adopted a plan to keep a bay permanently open on the regulator. He also promised to maintain a free opening in the weir that would allow for a minimum discharge of four hundred cusecs in the main stream during the dry season. In addition, the Mayapur regulator would have a free opening to provide a flow of two hundred cusecs to the Kankhal *ghāṭs*. A minimum supply of one thousand cusecs would be kept in the supply channel to feed the Haridwar *ghāṭs*.

While Malaviya was satisfied with the settlement, the Government of the United Provinces and engineers of the Irrigation Branch felt that they had been forced to make concessions to a public ignorant of the facts of the situation. Not surprisingly, in early 1917, the government retracted its accommodations while Meston was away attending the Imperial Conference in London. Altering the plan, they proposed to divert the new channel running from the regulator to a point on the original supply channel downstream from Har-kī-paurī Ghāṭ. By redirecting the route of this new diversion, they could argue that the new channel would not mix with the sacred stream running past Har-kī-paurī. In March, the Government of India authorized the Uttar Pradesh government to inform the All-India Hindu Sabha that an alternative arrangement was being considered. But the Uttar Pradesh government did not make the announcement and the Irrigation Department proceeded, without public consent, to demarcate a line for the new channel on Laljiwala Island.

Noticing the work on Laljiwala Island, the Hindu community protested to Meston, who had by that time returned from London. Meston wrote to the Government of India to condemn the government's departure from the December 1916 agreement. The Sri Ganga Hindu Sabha of Haridwar followed with a similar plea. Surprisingly, on 20 September 1917, the Government of India agreed to return to the 1916 resolution.

That resolution put in place a standing order that the Irrigation Department has since used to guide its engineering and public works projects. In 1995, the executor engineer of the Northern Division Ganga Canal in Roorkee pointed to the resolution in Appendix 1 of the *Standing Manual for River Ganga and Ganges Canal* and claimed to be following the order. The minutes of the 1916 meeting printed in the appendix included the guarantee of an uninterrupted flow of the Ganga through Har-kī-paurī. Above the *ghāṭ*, where the supply channel branches off from the main stream,

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the Irrigation Department is permitted to construct a *temporary* dam to close off the stream during the cleaning and repairing of the canal. Second, the head of the new supply channel cannot be fitted with gates. Several bays in the regulator should remain permanently open to allow the 'free' flow of Gaṅgā. In the weir on the main stream, a free gap would extend down to floor level and allow a minimum discharge of four hundred cusecs during the cold weather when the river is low. They also agreed to maintain a pool of four feet in Brahmā Kuṅḍ.[25]

At the sacred bathing *ghāṭ* in Haridwar today, strict rules regulating public behavior are enforced by the Sri Ganga Sabha. The Sri Ganga Sabha, whose origin can be traced to that crucial December meeting in 1916, is a trust which maintains facilities for pilgrims and represents the interests of the *paṇḍās* of Har-kī-paurī Ghāṭ. Originally established to protect the sacrality of Brahmā Kuṅḍ, today the Sri Ganga Sabha assumes exclusive control over the management of the material affairs of Har-kī-paurī. The trust employs a staff of over one hundred fifty to clean the *ghāṭ* daily and enforces rules for public use of the sacred space. Shoes and sandals cannot be worn on the *ghāṭ*, and photography, smoking, shaving, cooking, using oil or soap, and fishing are prohibited. The sabha runs a free first aid center and ambulance service for pilgrims, provides cold drinking water during the summer months, and has volunteers on hand to assist the elderly and women with children. The sabha is financed by donations given during *āratī*, a fire lamp offering to Gaṅgā made daily at sunrise and sunset.

The transcendent

For nationalists opposing colonial rule, the demand for Gaṅgā's unobstructed flow was a stratagem that revised a key cultural symbol to oppose political rule. This demand was not part of an environmental movement; rather, it invoked religious symbolism to bring religious leaders and nationalists together on a common platform. In the post-colonial present, by contrast, my discussions with religious leaders and ritual specialists have shown that they associate the notion of pollution with government attempts to interfere in the domain of religious affairs. By extension, they use the notion of Gaṅgā's sacred purity to defend their religious ideology against scientific ideology and interventions by government bureaucracy. This gives their interpretations of purity a defensive tone. Environmentalists and foreign observers interpret this position as

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general disinterest in 'preventing pollution' and getting involved with secular or civic cleanliness.

This does not mean that political leaders, on the other hand, have stepped in to exploit the ideological field. Although they have taken up the issue of 'cleaning' or 'saving' the river on several occasions, they have allowed this message to sink into a bureaucratic maze that works to dispossess the public of a role in civic cleanliness. Government officials have made references to the spiritual significance of Gaṅgā when explaining the importance of their cleaning programs; however, like religious leaders, they have failed to make the problem of river pollution a significant public issue.

In the mid-1980s, Rajiv Gandhi created the Ganga Action Plan, the first government pollution prevention scheme to rid the sacred river of industrial and domestic sewage. In Varanasi, at the inauguration of this central government plan, Rajiv Gandhi pledged to revitalize the Gaṅgā's sacred place in Indian society by setting to work to 'clean' the river. Since 1986, programs under the Ganga Action Plan have installed sewage disposal and treatment systems in many large cities bordering the river. During this time, many residents watched this implementation and had the opportunity to hear and read about the views of Ganga Action Plan officials.[26] Several nongovernmental organizations were also established during this period to oppose what they saw as the consolidation of government power in waste management.[27] Meanwhile, residents grew vocal in their skepticism of the government's touted successes in cleaning the river.

In 1995, religious leaders briefly publicized the issue of pollution prevention only to avoid following through with any plan of public action. In 1995, the VHP organized a pilgrimage they called the Ekatmata Yatra, and agreed to incorporate the pollution message suggested by the Kanpur environmental activist introduced earlier. The Ekatmata Yatra, or 'All-India Harmony Expedition,' originated in several different parts of the country and converged in Nagpur, Madhya Pradesh, for a final rally. Branches of the pilgrimage started at Rameshwaram and Kannyakumari in Tamil Nadu, Pashupatinath in Nepal, Gangasagar in West Bengal, Somnath in Gujarat, Parashuram Kund in Arunachal Pradesh, Amritsar in Punjab, Mahavirji in Rajasthan, and Haridwar in Uttar Pradesh.

The aim of the rally was to teach Indians about the importance of Mother India, Mother Cow, and Mother Gaṅgā. In their mandate, the religious leaders claimed that the pilgrimage would bring unity to a Hindu community that had 'fallen asleep' and remind Hindus of the importance of the cow

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for agriculture and Gaṅgā for the advent of Hindu civilization. Taking this mandate further, they linked the goals to their 1984 promise to destroy the mosques in Ayodhya and Kashi and the idgah in Mathura. Dressing these goals in more symbolic language, the VHP associated each sacred site with the sacred river it bordered: the Sarayū with Ayodhya, the Yamunā with Mathura, and the Gaṅgā with Kashi (Varanasi). Gaṅgā, the archetype of all rivers in India, was a key symbol in their tripartite message. Their published mandate for the event stated:

> The presiding deities of all these yatras will be the three Mothers, Ganga Mata, Bharatmata and Gowmata, whose images will be adorning the motorised chariots. In these Yatras, there will be chariot programmes, worship of Ganga kalash (pot), worship of cow-along-with-her-calf [sic], and worship of the sacred soil of India (sacred soils of Sri Ram Janma Bhumi, Ayodhya, Sri Krishna Janmasthan, Mathura, and Sri Kashi Vishwanath, Gyanvaapi, Varanasi). These worships will be conducted in 300,000 villages. There is the possibility of this number increasing.[28]

Among the objectives of the *yātrā* was the aim to: 'build up assertive public awareness to ensure maintenance of sanctity and purity of the Ganga, and also awareness against environmental pollution.' Yet, this had little to do with the dominant concern of the mandate, which clearly set out the Hindu community's enemy and used this identification with a common hatred to fuel the *yātrā*.[29] What is significant here is that this common Muslim enemy, while cast as the other in the struggle for sacred space, fades away when the focus shifts to the sacred purity of the Gaṅgā. Hindus have not cast Muslims as threats to Gaṅgā's purity. Moreover, Muslims are not enemies of the river. They also bathe in the Gaṅgā and offer religious donations (*dān*) in the form of fish, what they call *machlīdān*. Although Hindus in Varanasi may complain that Muslims consider Gaṅgā a mere river (by calling her *nadiyā*), they do not focus on a hatred of Muslims to defend Gaṅgā's purity. So any environmental message, howsoever it might revision notions of sacred purity and divine power, cannot build upon the sentiment wrapped up in the VHP's opposition to the Muslim other.

In Haridwar, at the beginning of one part of the Ekatmata Yatra, leaders of the VHP gathered with swamis, *śaṅkarācāryas* and members of parliament on Har-kī-paurī Ghāṭ to inaugurate the event.[30] Afterwards, pilgrims and tourists who had gathered to watch the *pūjā* took *darśan* (auspicious sight) of the spiritual leaders and registered their moral support. In the events that

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followed, as many predicted, the *pūjās* spoke more to the goal of altering the landscape of Islam than saving Gaṅgā.

Despite the public's general awareness of the Ganga Action Plan and of secular calls for pollution prevention, by 1995 many environmentalists complained that a curious kind of apathy plagued the public. This 'apathy' for the problems of material pollution, they argued, was most noticeable among religious leaders and pilgrim priests who promote pilgrimage to the banks of the Gaṅgā. Early in the year after the Ekatmata Yatra, I followed up this claim by interviewing religious leaders and pilgrims who had gathered in the month of Māgha (January–February) for religious observance and spiritual healing on the banks of the Gaṅgā in Allahabad. At the confluence of the Gaṅgā and Yamunā Rivers, *śaṅkarācāryas*, swamis from large missions and ashrams, and *brahmacārīs* and *sādhus*, gathered to live by the Gaṅgā, cook with *gaṅgājala*, do daily ablutions in the Gaṅgā, and perform *yajñas*. Through these rituals, they sought the grace of Gaṅgā and the power to bring about the purification of mind and soul.

Discussions with religious leaders at the Māgha Melā in 1995 helped to explain the conceptual dissonance between religious and environmental worldviews, but they also pointed toward other obstacles, both in ideology and praxis, that prevented an instrumental use of rhetoric about Gaṅgā's purity. I asked religious leaders to respond to questions regarding the extent to which they thought material pollution impacted the sacred purity of the river. When responding, several respected leaders refrained from mixing what they saw as two unrelated subjects: Gaṅgā's transcendent purity and the disintegration of the tangible or temporal world (represented here by 'environmental pollution'). Like VHP leaders, these religious specialists also claimed distance from government agencies and the political process at large when they refused to link the protection of Gaṅgā's purity to their own organizational or occupational activities. While many leaders acknowledged that industrial pollution and domestic waste were problems that civic authorities needed to deal with, they did not consider it their responsibility to assist officials in cleaning or protecting Gaṅgā from material pollution. Their role was to oversee the spiritual worship of Mother Gaṅgā.

On the other hand, many alluded to the need for moral regeneration in contemporary society, a regeneration that could have positive effects for civic cleanliness. They stressed the importance of becoming 'workers' in the quest for Gaṅgā's grace. Becoming workers involved casting away desire and practicing nonviolence and celibacy (*brahmacāryā*). These commitments could

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bring one closer to Gaṅgā's grace and to the regeneration of the moral order. A swami from the Rama Krishna Mission explained:

> We should become workers to obtain the ever-flowing grace of Gaṅgā. There should be religious conduct giving birth to truth; birth should be given over to nonviolence, and when one comes for residence (*kalpvās*) on the banks of Gaṅgā one should become a full *brahmācārya*. Stay away from enjoyments or unnecessary things. Do this so your conscience can be pure, so you can be a worker, so you can get Gaṅgā's grace, free from illusion. Like Lord Śaṅkarācārya said, Who is a worker? Who is a worker for grace? They say there are four forms of worship. So what is the first? The first is being full of understanding, the second is having the benefit of sons and service to the cow; the third is the eternal peace (*samādhi*) of saints; and the fourth is salvation. Why? Because we should get salvation (*mokṣa*) from the grace of Ma Gaṅgā.[31]

The meaning of Gaṅgā's purity developed by Hindu nationalists in the colonial period involved the significance of unobstructed flow. By contrast, while many residents of Varanasi and Allahabad commented that Gaṅgā's flow accounted for part of her purificatory power, they made no mention of dams or other obstructions. Rather, Gaṅgā's flow was generally valorized for its self-cleaning power, its mixing or hydraulic effect. One *paṇḍā* who lives and works at Daśāśvamedha remarked, 'Gaṅgā cleans herself during the monsoon' (*Gaṅgā khud hī sāph kartī hai*). During the monsoon, as many told me, Gaṅgā climbs up the ghat steps and takes away the silt and *gandagī*. A merchant explained, 'From the scientific view, there is pollution, but I do not understand this. Gaṅgā takes the pollution away in floods.' Leaders at the Māgha Melā, likewise did not mention the connection between purity and unobstructed flow. Instead, they argued that Gaṅgā's purity was distinctly removed from the transformations taking place in the material or transitory world. By extension, her purity cannot be described using the scientific or materialist notion of pollution put out by government agencies and some environmental organizations. The transcendent cannot be collapsed into the temporal or material. The *śaṅkarācārya* of Jaganath Puri explained:

> *gaṅgājala* gives unparalleled contribution to spiritual and bodily purification. Even scientists give a high position to *gaṅgājala* when comparing it with water from other rivers. Water from the faucet or a channel spoils very quickly compared to *gaṅgājala*. *Gaṅgājala* is never spoiled. *Gaṅgājala* is not impacted by the process of degeneration or defilement (*vikritiyo ko dūr kar*); there is a capacity in *gaṅgājala* for mixing. So, one should reside at the places where *gaṅgājala* has always been pure, and perform religious service (*sevam karnā*) as it should be done according to the śāstras. Gaṅgā must also be

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pure on the outside. When taking *darśan*, a devotee in his heart cannot see defilement. This is part of the responsibility of having devout sentiment. Also, from the scientific perspective, scientists welcome the importance of *gaṅgājala*. So the outer form of Gaṅgā should also be kept clean. They should not be opposed to purity (*śuddhtā*). When one is opposed to cleanness (*svacchtā*), then one's faith in purity falters. This means cleanness (*svacchtā*) is one thing and purity (*śuddhtā*) is another. We make soap from the oil of animals. Some people use it to bathe, to clean clothes. This is the way to make your life clean, but not to make it pure. Where *gaṅgājala* is pure (*śuddha*), there, on the outside, one's faith is secured. The eyes are convinced. One's faith is also formed by drinking *jala*. Therefore it is important that we pay attention to her cleanness. In whatever place (*sthān*) Gaṅgā is important, and wherever Yamunā is important in her place, and wherever the hidden form of Sarasvatī is important, and where all three meet at a confluence (*saṅgam*), this conception is manifested in the Vedas. Therefore, from the spiritual perspective, we worship the boundless importance of the *saṅgam*.[32]

The *śaṅkarācārya* was responding to my question about the distinction between purity (*śuddhtā*) and cleanness (*svacchtā*). To this, the *śaṅkarācārya* responded by arguing that purity (*śuddhtā*) is associated with Gaṅgā's transcendent power and cleanness (*svacchtā*) with her outer form (*bāhar se*). Gaṅgā's transcendent purity cannot be collapsed into her outward form; rather, the two are necessary complements to each other. The outer form is important to a pilgrim's faith in Gaṅgā's grace because it convinces one of truth through visualization. The outer form figures into Gaṅgā's purity, making cleanness (*svacchtā*) complementary but not conditional to purity (*śuddhtā*). While this distinction is multivalent both linguistically and culturally, a point I dealt with in my article 'Idioms of Degeneracy: Assessing Ganga's Purity and Pollution', it is important here as well because it allows the *śaṅkarācārya* to take the idea of separation further into distinguishing between the domains of religion and science.[33] First, he continued, religion is separate from but not opposed to science:

> But about the matter of science, our religion is not opposed to it nor uncongenial towards it. We support scientific research. Like the matchbox.... But in our active moral work (*kriyā karm*) we will respect our own *dharmaśāstras*. In worldly pursuits to the point that science is helpful, I welcome the usefulness of science. Scientists have created electricity; they have given computers, rockets. We don't oppose this. Opposition occurs when there is conflict (*takrār*). They are not one subject, but separate subjects. The Vedas gave special importance to one subject and scientists did not give importance to this. Our *śāstras* dealt with the subject of behavior and our *śāstras* have freed us from bodily suffering and worldly affairs. Because in the end, in plight or prosperity, these are the two benefits of our faith (*dharm*).

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Therefore, separate expertise is required to understand each realm. He continued:

> For example, we can ask, do you believe in your eyes or your ears? Do you understand? To see the essence of form, do you believe in your eyes or your ears? What answer will we give? On our eyes! Because the understanding of form is based on the eyes. The eyes are supreme in relation to form. So someone may say that in regard to sensation (*sparś*), some worship with the eyes and others do not. If knowledge of sensation is possible in other ways than through the eyes, then isn't the subject of science separate? The subjects of religion (*dharm*) and the *śāstras* are separate (*alag*) from science. When both subjects are separated (*alag alag*), then the contributions of both in their own fields can be appreciated. The lawyer is important in the court; the astrologer is important for making horoscopes. Both are important in their own right. But when we say that an astrologer should do the lawyer's work or if we tell a lawyer to become an astrologer, it will not work.

By advocating the separation of religion and science, this religious leader claimed that practitioners of each profession have their own rights and duties that must be appreciated and protected; one cannot do the work of the other. Without directly referring to the problem of power, he implied that the integrity of each expertise should be based on respect for each sphere of influence. This sense of separation was also echoed in the casual complaints of many ritual specialists on Daśāśvamedha Ghāṭ when they argued that cleaning was not their work but the work of the municipality and state agencies such as the Jal Nigam. These distinctions between occupational specializations can be taken as metaphorical extensions of the specialization of duties within the caste hierarchy. The principle of non-overlapping functions that Frédérique Apffel-Marglin and Robert Lingat described might be applied to the domains of religious leaders/ritual specialists and government officials.[34] In Apffel-Marglin's discussion, separation and wholeness are relevant in the ascending order of caste; when inferiors cross caste boundaries, their behavior invokes pollution, chaos, or confusion. Thus, high caste groups in particular have symbolic interest in keeping duties, food, articles, and other personal effects separated from the reach of lower caste groups. This separation allows them to appear autonomous and independent from other groups. On the other hand, these separations may be taken much less abstractly, as a rejection by upper caste Hindus of contact with lower caste occupations, such as sweeping and cleaning, that deal with impure substances.[35] What these data show, however, is that while these two reasons are tenable, they do not completely explain the other tensions that characterize relations between citizens and the government.

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In a broader sense, the *śaṅkarācārya's* idea of separation is congenial with the notion of separation advocated by Swami Chidananda, leader of the Divine Life Society. In 1995, Swami Chidananda gave a lecture to devotees and environmental activists on Gaṅgā's birthday (Gaṅgā Daśahrā) in the Himalayan town of Gangotri. In his talk, he advocated separation between the people and government by making a more direct reference to power and struggle. He said:

> People say they come to destroy mosques and temples. At that time [of the conflict in Ayodhya], there was so much passion generated. In one day, from the Himalayas to Kanya Kumari, from Arunachal and Meghalaya to the Punjab, they carried this passion. Why don't they have this much passion for saving the Gaṅgā and for the movement to save other rivers for the next generations? Why not? I have said that passion should be applied because humanity takes direction from love or hatred. This is the petrol and diesel used to move men. There in Ayodhya the passion is directed against Muslims. They are engrossed in anti-Muslim sentiment. It is a political thing. So everyone works for this passion. But here there is not this kind of passion because if opposition (*takrar*) occurs, it must occur with the government. But at every step we need the grace of government: for a permit we need the government, for information, we need them, for everything. We don't want to need the government! It's like that. There is a *concept* that we don't need any pomp and show from government. Go ahead and take what you want from government but I am ready for a hunger strike. I don't want anything from *sarkar* [government]! Then why should I care for *sarkar?* When we want something from them then our internal structure becomes weak. When we don't need anything we are strong. So without desire, with connection to God, we can sacrifice our own lives.[36]

Swami Chidananda alluded to the pervasiveness of Indian bureaucracy and the embeddedness of bureaucratic power in everyday life. While rejecting government assistance, he proposed that activism proceed outside the web of bureaucracy. Deriving his vision of resistance from the emergent model provided by Mahatma Gandhi, he explained that Gandhi had a soul force (*ātma bhāv*) that life workers should also generate. This soul force, the swami explained, comes from direct communication with God, a communication Gandhi achieved by reading the *Bhagavadgītā*. Connection with the 'cosmic, infinite, inlimitable [sic], boundless, immeasurable divine power that you call God (*adiśakti bhāv, parāśakti bhāv, mahāśakti bhāv*)' he proposed, 'will give you the power to persevere and the power to succeed.' Since a 'blind and non-comprehending attitude in the minds of the bureaucracy' was preventing real communication and undermining Hindu life and culture, *bhaktī-bhāv* and *visvās* were needed to create work with moral vision.

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Environmental activists argue that this kind of opposition to bureaucracy, while explicitly advocating moral action, has led the public to pursue a kind of passive resistance to government power. For example, the *paṇḍās*, of Daśāśvamedha often blamed the government for failing to clean the river under the Ganga Action Plan and for creating institutions that remain unresponsive to citizens' needs.[37] This allocation of blame was a kind of everyday resistance for them.[38] They complained that in a field controlled by a government that blocks citizen action, they can do very little. While Swami Chidananda agreed that the web of bureaucracy is pervasive and oppressive, unlike the *paṇḍās*, he advocated an active reform, taking assistance from divine power and proceeding independently from official government.

However, the tradition of religious mobilization has never exhibited efforts to engage in any form of environmental activism. As I suggested earlier, the symbolic dissonance between religious and environmental worldviews has tended to discourage such an interchange. Eulogies to Gaṅgā and worship of *gaṅgājala* are central sacred symbols in pilgrimages and in *pūjā*, but they do not describe *gaṅgājala* as a finite resource whose contours are shaped by a larger ecosystem.[39] Moreover, religious rituals cannot be confused with civic ethics. *Pūjā* and pilgrimage, according to their pristine meanings, are not undertaken to generate social effects. Rather, they are the means to communicate with and seek grace and power from a divine force, a presence that predetermines any social effect that may arise from ritual.

On the other hand, we find historical evidence for the political appropriation of the symbolism of Gaṅgā's purity, an appropriation that served the purpose of mobilizing religious and political leaders under a common political cause. But this hardly serves as a historical precedent for political use of purity rhetoric, because the symbol of Gaṅgā's purity has not played a consistent role in religious mobilization during colonial or precolonial periods. The appropriation of symbols of purity and unobstructed flow by Hindu nationalists in the colonial period was a strategy that, while serving the purposes of a broader political movement, ended in an agreement between government, scientific, and religious communities. In the current period, movements for reclaiming sacred spaces reproduce models of religious mobilization that successfully use religious symbols for political effect, yet leaders have not transferred the dynamism of these movements into environmental programs to save or clean Gaṅgā.

Shifting to ecosystem factors, the relative absence of political rhetoric about Gaṅgā's purity during precolonial and colonial periods may have

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reflected the vast powers of the river ecosystem.[40] Akbar's praise of *gaṅgājala* and his commitment to storing and drinking the river water spoke to the munificence of the river system. Before this, eulogies to Gaṅgā in the Purāṇas celebrated her bountiful virtues and Gupta sculpture depicted a voluptuous, motherly Gaṅgā.[41] The image was that her flow was abundant and powerful, providing for all without strain or limit. Today, some Hindus suggest limits to Gaṅgā's purificatory power when they refer to her 'capacity' (*ksamtā*) to purify or take away worldly dirtiness and impurity. Patterns of resource use in India put all rivers in a new predicament and force residents to acknowledge that waste is having some kind of impact on the Gaṅgā. Part of the way religious leaders deal with ecological change is to outline a separation between the domains of Hinduism and science (and with science, environmental pollution) and Hinduism and politics. This does not simply reproduce an opposition between tradition and modernity because, at another level, modernity is already incorporated into their position.[42] By defining Hinduism and science and Hinduism and politics as separate areas of specialization, the contradictions between their cultural logics can be momentarily elided, minimizing ideological conflict at a time when resources are in great demand. The problem for environmental activists is that this position of relative remove from active civic clean-up work aggravates the ecological health of the river.

Religious leaders and ritual specialists alike acknowledge that pollution prevention, like struggles to protect Gaṅgā's purity, involves competing claims to resources. While categories in the literature on natural resource management put the Gaṅgā somewhere along the continuum between an open-access resource and common property, a closer look reveals that Gaṅgā defies such a categorization.[43] This is because there are explicit and implicit (or sanctioned and subversive) institutions that govern use of and access to the river. At the explicit level are the departments under the Government of India that deal with resource management and the judiciary that enforces their policies. These are the dominant institutions. Religious institutions—sectarian organizations, temple committees, trusts, and public service agencies— are the implicit players, not recognized by the government as legitimate resource managers but respected by the public as moral authorities.

The government regulates uses of the river at the legal level, by restricting navigation, fishing, the building of dams or other obstructions, and the extraction of water in specified zones. Moreover, officials can exact penalties for dumping waste and effluent under the laws of the Pollution Control Boards.[44] However, these legal restrictions do not limit religious uses of the river and

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do not provide the only codes of 'resource management' understood and respected by the citizenry. Procedures for performing ablutions in the sacred texts (*śāstras*), for example, were rules that in some measure set out to regulate use of a common resource. Rules encoded in textual traditions and folk and oral narratives have taught devotees how to perform ablutions, how to think and act while on pilgrimage to Gaṅgā, how to enter sacred space, how to transport and store *gaṅgājala*, and how to use it in *pūjā* and other rituals. Priests at places of pilgrimage today loosely 'enforce' these prescriptions by preaching a similar set of instructions to pilgrims. They do not punish those who make minor transgressions, but teach and direct them. In addition to these cultural traditions, competing definitions of what waste is today make it difficult for officials to persuade the public to follow government policies or judicial orders. Religious leaders do not consider that ritual materials immersed in Gaṅgā—the statues (*mūrti*) of gods and goddesses and the saris and religious books offered to her—contribute to the waste problem in any significant way.

Yet, these freedoms from government control do mean that, despite their relative autonomy, the one set of claims is tied up with the other.[45] Contenders of the political-legal right to regulate behavior by punishing transgressions of the law and those upholding the religious-moral right to teach and direct public behavior in the practice of ritual must measure their respective powers through a kind of imagined compromise of power with the other. By proposing such a coexistence, however, the one set of rights becomes divorced from the other. The result is that the government that holds the legal mandate to enforce a code of conduct has little moral or social power. Government officials buckle under the pressure of mass movements such as pilgrimage and are unable to exact the punishments they are, in theory, empowered to exact. Religious leaders, while teaching and directing behavior, have no power to enforce conformity to the code they uphold and are reluctant to regulate the hand that feeds them. Religious and political leaders who avoid coming together in the name of preventing pollution share limitations to their power. Seeing Gaṅgā through different lenses, the respective groups keep their distance and disregard and discredit each other's traditions and bureaucracies.

There are, however, religious leaders and ritual specialists who defy acknowledgment of the impact of industrial modes of resource use and refuse to accept the possibility of a capacity to Gaṅgā's purifying power. Pollution is, for them, an altogether erroneous notion. Gaṅgā's powerful flow and motherliness attest to its fallacy. Eternal power (*acyuta viṣay*) cannot be understood through the eyes that affirm science, as the *śaṅkarācārya* said. Because this

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knowledge, as Swami Chidananda put it, comes from direct communication with God, an understanding of Gaṅgā cannot be collapsed into knowledge of material transformations. It cannot be approached in the way one washes dirt off the body with soap. It must be done through a holistic commitment to *dharma*. Scientific treatments to 'clean' the river are only as good as soap; they cannot reach or transform divine power. Cleaning the river and gaining knowledge (*jñāna*) from Gaṅgā are separate pursuits and should remain in their place.

At the end of the interview with the *śaṅkarācārya* from Jagannath Puri, he stressed that the vectors of space and time (*deś aur kāl*) intersect with any manifestation of sacredness. This is the visual truth (*darśnik tathya*) that underlies Gaṅgā's importance. Gaṅgā's power is especially apparent at Prayāg, during the month of Māgha, on the last day of the dark half of the month (*amāvasyā*) and on the full moon day (*pūrṇimā*). Her power intersects with radiant place (*ujjval deś*) and radiant time (*ujjval kāl*). This does not mean that Gaṅgā is sacred only at times of cosmic juncture that produce auspiciousness, but that her power can be accessed most readily by mortals when rituals are performed in radiant place and time. This does not reflect Gaṅgā's intermittent sacrality, but reflects a tradition that uses time and place to organize access to sacrality.[46] Gaṅgā occupies a fixed sacrality beyond space and time (*acyut*). She is therefore imperishable in both space and time.

Many scholars have argued that Western notions of sacred and secular cannot be applied to Indian religious and political circumstances.[47] Yet, despite its inappropriateness, the foreign model of separation has been adopted by some modern Indians. Government and its secular ideology, by negating religion or attempting to remove religious power from public life, have made little headway in India. Rather, secular ideology remains 'encompassed' by the religious.[48] Other scholars, however, have explained the cultural roots of this encompassment to raise a warning flag. Indeed, religious institutions, with their capacity to teach and direct, are making the far more significant strides in mobilizing the public, while government powers to regulate public behavior remain largely ineffective. But in defense of Gaṅgā's purity, religious ideology does not encompass, but pulls away from, secular and scientific ideologies to achieve a kind of territorial integrity. Religious leaders pull away from political leaders to prevent government intervention in religious affairs.[49] They do not appropriate the political process to achieve a movement in religious consciousness. To remain powerful in their own right, religious leaders maintain claims to Gaṅgā in distinctly transcendent terms, distinguishing politics, science, and environmental pollution as pursuits of a separate and more mundane order.

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Prognosis

Possibilities for collaboration among religious and political leaders in the area of environmental activism might arise if the distinction between purity and cleanness were used in a sensitive manner to mobilize Hindu sentiment. However, the boundedness of the domains of Hinduism, politics, and science/environmental pollution that many religious leaders articulate will likely act as a formidable obstacle to any kind of coordinated coalition building. In the colonial period, nationalist leaders and religious leaders worked together to resist the canal projects engineered by a common enemy, the British government official. An opposition to a common enemy assisted in the process of unification. In the postcolonial period, political and religious leaders no longer have a common enemy to oppose when they discuss the importance of the river Gaṅgā. The Muslim 'other' staged in struggles over sacred space fades away in discussions about Gaṅgā's sacrality. Moreover, contemporary political leaders, unlike nationalist leaders, negotiate a dynamic field of power. Their grasp on political positions is often tentative and short-lived. Therefore, ideological struggles must produce quick results and, to do so, must draw upon a strong base of public sentiment. Since the resistance to canal modifications at the turn of the century, no other concerted efforts to protect Gaṅgā's purity and sacrality have evolved in the modern historical record. The particular nationalist resistance I described did not move other leaders toward the creation of a robust field of public activity and sentiment equal to the struggles over sacred spaces that have moved political leaders in colonial and postcolonial periods. I suggest that if environmental activism continues to develop in India, it will likely expand out of coalitions between nongovernmental activists and public interest lawyers long before it does so at the crossroads of religious and political movements.

Notes

1. See Peter van der Veer, 'God Must Be Liberated! A Hindu Liberation Movement in Ayodhya,' *Modern Asian Studies* 21, no. 2 (1987): 283–301; van der Veer, *Religious Nationalism: Hindus and Muslims in India* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1994); and van der Veer, 'The Ruined Center: Religion and Mass Politics in India,' *Journal of International Affairs* 50, no. 1 (1996): 254–77.

2. The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) rule in state governments is as follows. In Madya Pradesh they ruled from 1990 to 1992. In Uttar Pradesh they held the

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government from 1991 to 1992. Again in Uttar Pradesh in 1995, the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) split with the Samajwadi Party (SP) with BJP support, but it was a BSP government. In 1996, the BJP formed another coalition after elections with the BSP, but then split from the BSP to head the government. In Rajasthan, they held power from 1990 to 1992 and from 1993 to 1998. In Maharashtra, they were in power from 1995 through the writing of this article in early 1999. The governments that ended abruptly in 1992 were ends imposed by the central government after the demolition of the Babri Masjid.

3. The events in Ayodhya in 1992 brought a great deal of attention to bear on the issues of religious nationalism, secularism, and communalism. For discussions of these issues, see: Ajit Kumar Jha, 'Hindutva Swadeshi: Waves of Economic Nationalism,' *Times of India* (New Delhi), 6 September 1995; T.N. Madan, 'Whither Indian Secularism?' *Modern Asian Studies* 27, no. 3 (1993): 667–97; Barbara Stoler Miller, 'Presidential Address: Contending Narratives—The Political Life of the Indian Epics,' *Journal of Asian Studies* 50, no. 4 (1991): 783–92; Subrata Kumar Mitra, 'Desecularising the State: Religion and Politics in India after Independence,' *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 33, no. 4 (1991): 775–77; Manju Parikh, 'The Debacle at Ayodhya,' *Asian Survey* 33, no. 7 (1993): 673–84; Vidya Subrahmaniam, 'Redefining Secularism: Gap between Theory and Practice,' *Times of India* (New Delhi), 22 September 1995; Ramesh Thakur, 'Ayodhya and the Politics of India's Secularism,' *Asian Survey* 33 (July 1993): 645–64; Prakash Chandra Upadhyaya, 'The Politics of Indian Secularism,' *Modern Asian Studies* 26, no. 4 (1992): 815–53; and van der Veer, 'The Ruined Center: Religion and Mass Politics in India.' However, comments by T.N. Madan in his article 'Secularism in Its Place,' *Journal of Asian Studies* 46, no. 4 (1987): 747–59, several years earlier, make it clear that secularism has been a conundrum for scholars and nationalists since the independence of India and Nehru's first designs for national policy.

4. See the *Statesman* (11 August 1995, 12 August 1995, 14 August 1995, 15 August 1995, and 18 August 1995, p. 1) and the *Times of India* (14 August 1995, p. 1, and 24 August 1995) for news reports about the VHP's agenda in Mathura around the time it planned and executed a *māhāyajña* on Janamāṣṭamī (Kṛṣna's birthday).

5. See Kelly D. Alley, 'Idioms of Degeneracy: Assessing Ganga's Purity and Pollution,' in *Purifying the Earthly Body of God: Religion and Ecology in Hindu India*, ed. Lance Nelson (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1998).

6. Pilgrim priests on Daśāśvamedha, as well as religious leaders I introduce later in the text, tended to focus discussion of Gaṅgā's power on sacred purity. They did not elaborate on Gaṅgā's fertility or auspiciousness or the impact waste might have on these conditions. This contrasts markedly with the statements of informants in Maharashtra gathered by Anne Feldhaus in *Water and Womanhood: Religious Meanings of Rivers in Maharashtra* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995). Her informants have associated sacred rivers with fertility and their powers with auspiciousness. While

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I have not looked at this contrast systematically yet, I would venture the argument that the significant male bias in the discourses I represent here contributes to the emphasis on purity over fertility.

7. The fish market just behind Daśāśvamedha Ghāṭ is the biggest culprit. Vendors apparently let their waste roll through open drains down the embankment into the Gaṅgā. This attracts flies and other insects to the area.

8. See Alley, 'Idioms of Degeneracy,' for a discussion of *gandagi*.

9. By environmental pollution, I am referring to the modern scientific notion and not in any way to the anthropological notion of ritual impurity or pollution. Ritual pollution can, however, occur in conditions of material or environmental pollution and when doing so can make the distinction between the two harder to define.

10. See F. Fitzjames, *Preliminary Report of the Sewerage and Water Supply of the City of Benaras*, Government of NW Provinces and Oudh, Public Works Department (Allahabad, 1888); quoted in Kelly D. Alley, 'Ganga and Gandagi: Interpretations of Pollution and Waste in Banares,' *Ethnology* 33, no. 2 (1994): 132. See also Nita Kumar, *Friends, Brothers, and Informants* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1992).

11. M.A. Parmanand, in his book *Mahamana Madan Mohan Malaviya: An Historical Biography* (Varanasi: Malaviya Adhyayan Sansthan, 1985), 244, summarized the Hindu sentiment toward canal engineering in the following passage:

> The reverence which the Hindu feels for the Ganga and its water is equalled only by his veneration of the Brahman and the cow. He believes Ganga water to be so holy that, let alone a bath or ablution, even a sip, touch or sight of it, washes away sin. He cannot however ascribe the same virtue to water drawn from the Ganga into a canal which, in his eyes, does not possess the same virtue.

12. W.W. Hunter, *The Imperial Gazetteer of India*, vol. 4 (London: Trubner and Company, 1888), 1–5.

13. A *ghāṭ* is a flight of steps that provides access to the river. It is also considered a place of sacred power.

14. This is the site of the Kumbha Melā, a festival that takes place once every twelve years in Haridwar, Allahabad, Nasik, and Ujjain.

15. Walter Hamilton, *East-India Gazetteer*, 2d ed., vol. 1 (Delhi: Low Price Publishers, 1993 [1828]), 667–669.

16. Hunter, *Imperial Gazetteer of India*, 4, and Dangli Prasad Varun, *Gazetteer of India—Uttar Pradesh, District of Saharanpur* (Lucknow: Government of Uttar Pradesh, Department of District Gazetteers, 1981), 336.

17. Over the last quarter of the nineteenth century, irrigation canals in Roorkee District have effectively combated drought (see Varun, *Gazetteer of India*, 112). In contrast to the drought of 1868–69, when almost all the autumn crops were lost except

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those in the irrigated region, in 1870, 162,317 acres in Saharanpur District were irrigated, out of which 84,404, or more than half, were watered from canals alone (see Hunter, *Imperial Gazetteer of India*, 104). In 1884–85, canals supplied water to 71,916 acres (29,100 hectares). This increased to 80,724 acres (32,668 hectares) in the following decade and to 1,21,550 acres (49,190 hectares) annually thereafter.

18. Parmanand, *Mahamana Madan Mohan Malaviya*, 254.

19. Ibid., 245.

20. Ibid., 247.

21. Ibid., 247–48.

22. Chief Secretary, Government of Uttar Pradesh, to Home Department of India, 5 February 1917; cited in Parmanand, *Mahamana Madan Mohan Malaviya*, 250).

23. Parmanand, *Mahamana Madan Mohan Malaviya*, 252.

24. Ibid., 254–55.

25. The appendix reads:

I. To guarantee an uninterupted flow of the Ganges through Har-ki-Pairi and past the other ghats of Hardwar, Katchha (temporary) bund will be made at the head of channel no. 1 when necessary a minimum supply of 1000 cusecs in that channel being guaranteed except at periods when clearing of the shoaling in channel no. 1 is in progress; the Irrigation Branch undertaking that this work will be carried through as expeditiously as possible in order to ensure a flow from this channel into the Har-ki-Pairi.

II. The opening to supply channel no. 1 will be left for the present exactly as it is. Should experience show that this is dangerous, it may be necessary to curtail the width of the present opening and to take measures to prevent the retrogression of the bed. But no steps beyond these will be taken without prior consultation with the Hindu Community.

III. The head of new supply channel will not be fitted with gates.

Some bays contiguous to each other will be completely closed up with masonry and earth banks, some bays will be completely open. All bays whether open or closed will have a foot bridge. The floor on the Hardwar side will be level with the sell and with the bed of the supply channel. The Irrigation Branch reserves to itself the right of keeping open or closed by masonry as many of the bays as experience from time to time shows, may be necessary for the purpose of feeding the canal which starts at Mayapur and also in the interest of the safety of the town of Hardwar and the existing canal works but such bays as are kept open will be completely open as described above and whatever bays are closed, will be kept completely closed with masonry and banks as mentioned above.

The existing grooves will be left in what is now called the head of the supply channel. These grooves will never be used except in case of some impending calamity of accident to Hardwar or the existing canal works, when it is of vital importance to close completely the openings by means of wooden planks for a short period.

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IV. A free gap will be left in the weir which will go down to floor level. The openings will be so constructed that it will give according to calculations of Irrigation Branch a minimum discharge of 400 cusecs at the cold weather low level of the river. For this purpose a record of gauges will be kept by the Irrigation Branch.

N. At Mayapur regulator a free opening going down to the upstream bed level will be made calculated to provide a permanent floor of 200 cusecs for the service of the Kankhal ghats, which after leaving Kankhal will ultimately flow into the Ganges.

N.B. The free gaps at Bhimgoda weir and Mayapur Dam may be closed by the Irrigation Department when necessary for the purpose of floor repairs or other emergencies but only for a short time and on informing the Hindu Sabha.

V. A depth of 4 ft. of water in the Har-ki-Pairi pool will be guaranteed by and at the cost of Irrigation Department.

26. Officials with this secular worldview work in the Ministry of Environment and Forests and in the Uttar Pradesh Jal Nigam.

27. See Alley, 'Ganga and Gandagi,' and 'Idioms of Degeneracy,' for discussions of the environmental activism of the Sankat Mochan Foundation of Banaras. See also Kelly D. Alley, 'Urban Institutions at the Crossroads: Kanpur under the Ganga Action Plan,' *Urban Anthropology* 25, no. 4 (1996), for a discussion of the work of Eco-Friends of Kanpur.

28. The memorandum later stated that the aim was: 'to get people [to] take pledge to construct stately temples symbolizing our national heritage and moorings at Sri Ram Janma Bhumi, Ayodhya, Sri Krishna Janmasthan, Mathura, and Sri Gyaanvaapi Vishwanath spot, Varanasi' (*Ekatmata Yatra*, October/November 1995, 2).

29. See also Dipankar Gupta, 'The Search for Martyrs: Hindutva's New Logic of Imagination,' *Times of India* (New Delhi), 2 September 1997.

30. The minister of parliament at that time from Madhya Pradesh, Swami Chinmayananda, Ashok Singhal, Vishnu Hari Dalmia, Śaṅkarācārya Rambhadracarya of Chitrakoot, Śaṅkarācārya Jagadguru Ramanandacarya Ji (the identity of both as *śaṅkarācāryas* is disputed), Haryacarje Maharaj of Ayodhya, Swami Prakashanand Giri Mahasnandedeshwar, and Jagadguru Vasudevanand Saraswati were present.

31. These statements, provided by a swami of the Rama Krishna Mission, were tape-recorded during an interview at the Melā, January 1996.

32. From a tape-recorded interview with Śaṅkarācārya Sri Nischalanand of Saraswati Goverdhan Muth in Jagannath Puri.

33. See Alley, 'Idioms of Degeneracy.'

34. See Frédérique Apffel-Marglin's discussion of Robert Lingat in 'Power, Purity and Pollution: Aspects of the Caste System Reconsidered,' *Contributions to Indian Sociology* 11, no. 2 (1977): 252.

35. Frank Korom, 'On the Ethics and Aesthetics of Recycling in India,' in *Purifying the Earthly Body of God: Religion and Ecology in Hindu India*, ed. Lance Nelson (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1998).

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36. Excerpt from a tape recording of his talk. The talk was given in Hindi, but the phrases in bold mark where he spoke in English.

37. Alley, 'Ganga and Gandagi,' 138–39.

38. I am using the term in the sense James C. Scott describes in his book *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance* (New Haven: Yale University Press 1985).

39. See Feldhaus, *Water and Womanhood: Religious Meanings of Rivers in Maharashtra*, and Peter van der Veer, *Religious Nationalism: Hindus and Muslims in India* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1994).

40. See Madhav Gadgil and Ramachandra Guha, *This Fissured Land: An Ecological History of India* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1992), for a discussion of broadly generalized modes of resource use in precolonial and colonial periods.

41. See Savitri V. Kumar, *The Pauranic Lore of Holy Water-Places* (New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal, 1983).

42. See, for example, the *śaṅkarācārya's* reference to the possibility for a science that is congenial with the moral work.

43. For discussions of these categories, see Harry W. Blair, 'Democracy, Equity and Common Property Resource Management in the Indian Subcontinent,' *Development and Change* 27 (1996): 475–99; *Making the Commons Work: Theory, Practice, and Policy*, ed. Daniel W. Bromley et al. (San Francisco: Institute for Contemporary Studies, 1992); David Feeny, Fikret Berkes, Bonnie McCay, and James Acheson, 'The Tragedy of the Commons: Twenty-Two Years Later,' *Human Ecology* 18, no. 1 (1992): 1–19; *The Question of the Commons: the Culture and Ecology of Communal Resources*, ed. Bonnie McCay and James M. Acheson (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1987).

44. See Alley, 'Urban Institutions at the Crossroads,' for a discussion of environmental laws and the duties of the Pollution Control Boards.

45. These sets of claims do not fall into the hierarchical model that Louis Dumont provided in *Homo Hierarchicus* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970), a model in which the sacred principle of pure and impure encompasses the 'secular' power of Kṣatriyas. Putting to rest Dumont's version of the sacred-secular opposition, this connection between claims must be understood in terms of the specific legal and moral codes that seek to define Gaṅgā's power and uses.

46. See Vijaya Rettakudi Nagarajan, 'The Earth as Goddess Bhūdevi: Toward a Theory of 'Embedded Ecologies' in Folk Hinduism,' in *Purifying the Earthly Body of God: Religion and Ecology in Hindu India*, ed. Lance Nelson (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1998), for a discussion of how sacrality moves around with rises and lapses. She uses this notion to argue that the *kōlam* ritual art tradition practiced by South Indian women locates the sacrality of Mother Earth (*Bhūdevī*) only temporarily in the space where the *kōlam* is created.

47. See, for example, Madan, 'Secularism in Its Place,' 755.

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48. Ibid., 753. T.N. Madan's categories of sacred and secular are not to be conflated with Louis Dumont's: Madan is referring to contemporary relations between institutions, whereas Dumont was concerned with relations between caste groups. Still, by using Dumont's original phraseology of encompassment, the risk is that his sense of the secular might be applied. Frédérique Apffel-Marglin's clear critique of Dumont's opposition, in her 'Power, Purity and Pollution,' enables one to move beyond the artificial separation of status and power to consider Madan's more meaningful references to the institutional tensions between secular ideology and what he refers to as 'the religious.'

49. I do admit a few exceptions to this general rule. For example, Dr. Veer Bhadra Misra, *mahant* of the Sankat Mochan Temple in Varanasi, has worked diligently for years to challenge the government's sewage management plans in that sacred city and to formulate alternate proposals. I have known Dr. Misra (Mahantji) for several years and wrote about his work with the Sankat Mochan Foundation in Alley, 'Ganga and Gandagi,' and Alley, 'Idioms of Degeneracy.' In a book manuscript I have just completed I also outline how Swami Chinmayananda, a *sādhu-sant* and BJP politician, has issued calls to protect Gaṅgā's sacrality against environmental pollution. But, in that case, again, the calls have proved to be short-lived political appropriations. For more on *sādhu-sants* in the BJP, see Virginia Vandyke, 'Sadhus, Sants and Politics: Religious Mobilization and Communalism in India' (Ph.D. diss., University of Washington, 1999).

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Gangotri, Gomukh and the Sources of the Ganga[1]

Richard Barz

Spectacularly situated at the bottom of a gorge carved by the Bhagirathi River through the loftiest range of the Himalayas, Gangotri enjoys a superb setting. To this geographical splendour is added a pre-eminent sanctity resulting from the town's position on a river which is the primary source of the holy Ganga. Although it has sanctity and a magnificent location, Gangotri lacks just about every civic embellishment from town planning to a meaningful sewerage system.[2] It presents to the eye a ramshackle scene that might be called quaint but certainly not beautiful. That all is not well with the town infrastructure is no secret. This is plainly indicated by the words, given here in English translation, of a Hindi sign which was posted at the entrance to Gangotri on my first visit in October 2001 and was still there when I returned in June 2003:

> National Environment Vigilance Campaign 1998–99
>
> Gangaji is the symbol of Indian culture, prosperity and the Hindu religion. It is a heinous sin to bathe with soap or wash clothing in it, to discharge urine or faeces near it, to dump rubbish etc. in it. You have come to Gangotri to earn religious merit, so stop, don't acquire sin by doing the above-mentioned vile actions. Keep the water of the Ganga clean. Let clean water be the right of every Indian. Come, for this purpose we should all become resolute today and immediately begin this good action. Thank you.[3]

Despite its haphazard layout and bad sanitation, the general impact of the town is not a bad one. For one thing, at an altitude of 3,145 metres the air in Gangotri is fresh and invigorating. For another, after the two-day journey up from Haridwar higher and higher into the mountains over narrow, winding roads at the mercy of undisciplined traffic, the traveller will look upon

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Gangotri with delight as the conclusion of a harrowing trip. Since wheeled vehicles can proceed no further than the parking area at the end of the road and the beginning of the bazaar, Gangotri is not just the end of the trip but the conclusion of any further motorized travel. Finally, the tumbling, roaring mountain stream that is the Bhagirathi provides such breathtaking drama that there is little inclination to quibble about Gangotri's jerry-built construction. To savour this riverine spectacle, one need only step out onto the especially well-situated veranda of the first of the row of *dhaba*-style restaurants at the entrance to Gangotri bazaar. Below this veranda, cantilevered over the rushing waters of the Bhagirathi opposite the point where it receives its rambunctious Kedar Ganga tributary, the river plunges through rapids and over a waterfall. On it races, constricted by its ever more contracted gorge, toward Gaurikund, the pool where the god Shiva's wife Parvati, called Gauri 'the fair-complexioned woman', used to bathe.

The sacred complex at Gangotri

In the vicinity of Gangotri there are a few holy places like Gaurikund for the devout and mountain treks for more secular devotees of nature. But in Gangotri itself there is nowhere to go except Shri Ganga Mandir, the temple to the Ganga as goddess and the *raison d'être* of the town. Since there is no industry in Gangotri apart from the care and maintenance of pilgrims, there is little to distract the visitor from the temple. There is certainly no prospect of shopping since there is little to buy in the bazaar aside from a restricted range of food, non-alcoholic drink and basic religious paraphernalia. There is also no danger that one will lose one's way or be unable to find Shri Ganga Mandir because the town's single lane on the right bank of the river terminates at the temple. One passes down the lane through the bazaar, then up a short flight of stairs under what is by Gangotri standards an imposing red gateway and enters the courtyard in front of the temple.

Shri Ganga's temple, a square two-storey silvery white structure built of stone, faces to the east, upstream and away from the town.[4] It is some 12 metres in height. Although it is in the Garhwal region of the Indian state of Uttarakhand, Shri Ganga Mandir is not like any other temple either in that region or in neighbouring Kumaon. In design it brings to mind, at least to mine, nothing so much as a small Orthodox church in Greece. The front of the temple is a porch crowned by a three-sided pitched roof. The porch has three archways with the centre one taller than the other two. Pilgrims go into

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and out of the sanctum through the archway on the right, with a railing in the middle of the passage to keep those entering and those leaving separate and in single file. Over the sanctum the temple's central dome rises from a square base to culminate in a finial. Built into each of the four sides of the dome are three much smaller domes, with the middle domes larger than the other two. At each exterior corner of the sanctum is a two-storey domed tower with a small window on each floor. The overall effect is pleasingly symmetrical.

Within the sanctum is an image of the goddess Ganga. It is to worship this image that Hindu pilgrims come to Gangotri in numbers that over the past three decades have continually increased from year to year: going from 85,980 in 1987 to 306,536 in 1998.[5] Along with the goddess Ganga, the sanctum also houses the images of many other divinities, among them Yamuna, Lakshmi, Saraswati and Annapurna. There is also a small likeness of Bhagiratha, the legendary king who is credited with bringing the heavenly Ganga down at Gangotri into the stream that bears his name.

Because of heavy winter snowfalls and extreme cold, Shri Ganga Mandir, along with the rest of the town of Gangotri, closes after Diwali and opens again on Akshaya Tritya. Since the date of both holidays is determined by the Hindu lunar calendar, the closure can vary from mid October through early November and the opening between late April and early May. During the winter months the image of the goddess Ganga is taken to stay in the village of Mukhba 30 kilometres downstream and a skeleton staff of caretakers watches over the temple.

Shri Ganga Mandir is not an ancient temple. The first person to leave a record of a visit to Gangotri, an anonymous traveller who described it to the Jesuit geographer Joseph Tieffenthaller (1710–1785), made no mention of a temple there.[6] The second visitor to Gangotri to leave an account was the sadhu Purana Poori who was there in the last quarter of the eighteenth century. Purana Poori also found no temple or shrine at Gangotri but saw only a statue of King Bhagiratha there[7].

The first temple at Gangotri was a simple building erected for the goddess Ganga by Amar Singh Thapa (1761–1816), a general in the Gurkha army that invaded Garhwal from Nepal in 1803. Amar Singh Thapa did not record his reasons for having the Ganga temple built, but Francis White in his *Travels in Garhwal* published in London in 1828 writes that the Gurkha general intended the temple to be 'a memorial of his conquests and his piety'.[8] Since Amar Singh Thapa was occupied in 1803 and 1804 with the conquest of Garhwal[9] and seems to have spent 1805 incorporating it into the Kingdom of

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Nepal, he probably had the temple constructed in 1806 or 1807. It certainly was in existence in May 1808 when it was seen by an unnamed munshi sent to Gangotri by Lieutenant William Webb, leader of an East India Company expedition to determine the sources of the Ganga. In the munshi's description the temple was small, about eight or ten feet [two and a half to three metres] high, and built on the bank of the Bhagirathi River. Inside the temple, along with other deities, was an image of the goddess Ganga.[10]

The fourth person to record his impressions of Gangotri—after Tieffenthaller's informant, Purana Poori and the munshi with Webb's expedition—was James Baillie Fraser. Since the first three visitors dictated their accounts to another person, Fraser, who reached Gangotri in the course of a journey of exploration to the sources of the Ganga and Yamuna rivers, was the first to publish his own eye-witness description of the temple at Gangotri. An accomplished artist, he was also the first to produce a sketch of the building. Although his brother William Fraser, First Assistant at the East India Company's Residency at the Mughal court in Delhi, was intimately involved with the Company's administrative reorganization of Garhwal after the conclusion of the Anglo-Nepal War (1814–1816), James Fraser ostensibly undertook his exploration as a private citizen. He arrived at Gangotri in May 1815 just after the Gurkhas under Amar Singh Thapa had been defeated by an East India Company army and evicted from Garhwal.[11] Fraser describes the Gangotri temple as a small, very plain, square building, white in colour with red mouldings.[12] Like the munshi seven years before him, he situated the temple on the Bhagirathi, putting it about 15 feet [4.6 metres] above the water. He says that the temple tower was rounded at the top and surmounted by circular, scalloped ornaments. There was a porch covered with a pitched roof attached to the eastern side of the temple. His estimate of the height of the temple, 16 to 20 feet [4.8 to 6 metres], is twice that of the munshi's guess. To the left of the temple was a small but comfortable house built for the accommodation of the brahmans who came to officiate there. All of this is vividly and clearly depicted in Fraser's sketch of the temple and surrounds.[13] As for the reasons for the temple's construction, Fraser says that the brahmans who traditionally conducted worship of the Ganga at Gangotri had felt no desire or necessity for a temple there and would have been content to continue carrying on worship without a temple.[14] Whatever Amar Singh Thapa's reasons for building the temple may have been, they didn't involve satisfying the wishes of the brahmans at Gangotri.

It should be kept in mind that neither the two eighteenth century visitors nor the munshi, Fraser or any other nineteenth century travellers found a village or

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town at Gangotri. The settlement around the temple to the goddess Ganga consisted only of a residence for a few brahman priests and some huts for occasional pilgrims. Even as late as 1980, aside from Shri Ganga Mandir, there were only a few substantial buildings constructed of timber and stone in Gangotri. Most structures were temporary, being rebuilt every spring after the damaging snowfalls of winter.[15] It was not until the last ten or fifteen years of the twentieth century that Gangotri could be called a town, and then only when inhabited in summer.[16]

Shri Ganga Mandir is not the temple built by Amar Singh Thapa and dates only from 1915 when Maharaja Sawai Madho Singh II, ruler of Jaipur from 1880 to 1922, had it built.[17] Besides Shri Ganga Mandir, Madho Singh erected or renovated many other Hindu temples and shrines in various parts of India. There is some difference of opinion about whether Madho Singh incorporated parts of Amar Singh Thapa's building into Shri Ganga Mandir or had an entirely new edifice constructed with nothing included from the earlier temple. Sarkar and Sinh hold to the former opinion, saying that Madho Singh 'repaired and adorned' the temple at Gangotri,[18] while Roy and Śāh support the latter, saying that he built an entirely new temple.[19] Three pieces of evidence strongly support the view that Shri Ganga Mandir is completely different from Amar Singh Thapa's temple. The first is that the exterior appearance of Shri Ganga Mandir is so different from Amar Singh Thapa's temple as it was drawn in the nineteenth century by artists including (in addition to James Fraser) G.F. White and William Prinsep,[20] that no external vestige of the older temple can be seen in the new one. If any vestiges do survive, then they would have to be in internal features only. Second, the descriptions of the older temple made by Webb's munshi and James Fraser, reinforced by the sketches, place it right on the bank of the Bhagirathi River. Two subsequent travellers, J. A. Hodgson in 1817 and Thomas Skinner in the late 1820s, confirm the position of the temple at the river's edge.[21] Shri Ganga Mandir, in contrast, is in sight of the river but is not on it. Third, Fraser says that the temple that he saw was built precisely on the sacred rock on which, according to tradition, King Bhagiratha performed his devotions to Shiva.[22] The rock where Bhagiratha did his austerities is today under a small open-sided pavilion close to the edge of the river but across a courtyard and down a flight of stairs from Shri Ganga Mandir. Taking all of these factors into consideration, it seems likely that in 1915 Madho Singh had Amar Singh Thapa's early nineteenth century temple removed, replaced it with the pavilion over the sacred rock and a stylistically modern statue of King Bhagiratha and had Shri Ganga Mandir constructed further back from the river as a new building on a new site.

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Adjacent to Shri Ganga Mandir is a second temple, Shri Gauri Shankar Mandir. This temple is dedicated to Shiva under his epithet *shankar*, 'he who causes prosperity', as the husband of Gauri. Shri Gauri Shankar Mandir is made of whitewashed stone and is much smaller than its neighbour, being only about a third as tall, and in style more like a Garhwali temple. This temple consists of a square vestibule attached to a sanctuary, also square, over which is a tower or *shikhar*. The vestibule is covered with a pitched roof and has a rectangular doorway over which is suspended a bell so that worshippers entering the sanctuary may announce themselves. The *shikhar* has a Garhwali-style open-sided wooden cupola at its apex. In the sanctuary are installed images of Shiva and Shiva's manifestation Bhairav.[23] Bhairav, whose name means 'fearsome' in Sanskrit, is associated with death and traditionally in the Himalayan region serves as guardian of sacred places.

As the guardian of Shri Ganga's temple precinct at Gangotri, Bhairav has had a shrine there as long as the precinct has existed. Presumably the Bhairav shrine which James Fraser mentions as 'a small pagoda-shaped temple'[24] was built along with the temple to the goddess Ganga out of the funds provided by Amar Singh Thapa. The domed top of Bhairav's shrine is visible in Fraser's sketch of the Ganga temple just in front of the temple porch.[25] A better view of the Bhairav temple in relation to the Ganga temple is given in a sketch made by William Simpson in 1861.[26] The little Bhairav temple was evidently demolished along with Amar Singh Thapa's Ganga temple in 1915 and replaced by the present-day Shri Gauri Shankar Mandir, probably built by Madho Singh when he had Shri Ganga Mandir constructed in the new location.

The courtyard in front of the two temples is extensive enough to accommodate the large crowds that gather in the evenings to witness the *arati* ceremony of worship with lighted lamps for which Shri Ganga Mandir is famous. On the side of the courtyard toward the river are two low, green-roofed administrative buildings for the use of the Semwal brahmans who conduct the puja in Shri Ganga Mandir. These brahmans also preserve for future generations records of the visit to the temple of those pilgrims who make a suitable donation. On the opposite side of the courtyard is an interesting timber and stone structure in old-fashioned local style which may have been a *dharmshala* for the lodging of pilgrims, but in 2003 seemed to be derelict. Shri Ganga Mandir, Shri Gauri Shankar Mandir and the other buildings around the courtyard make up the first of the three focal points of the sacred complex at Gangotri.

A flight of steps leads down from the temple courtyard under a simple gateway, from which are hung several brass bells, to the bathing ghat on

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the river. The ghat is the second focal point of Gangotri's sacred complex. Although the river is frigidly cold and runs dangerously fast, no pilgrimage to Gangotri would be complete without a brief dip in the holy water. Such bathing is not without danger. On one of my visits to the town while walking along the river below Gaurikund I came upon a group of policemen trying to recover from the river the body of a drowned man. He had perhaps been swept from the bathing ghat by the powerful current.

Before reaching the ghat, at the base of the stairs on the left-hand side, is the pavilion mentioned above, which is the third of the focal points of the sacred complex at Gangotri. Sheltered by this pavilion is the statue of King Bhagiratha and a stone slab in which is impressed the king's footprint. The Semwal brahman who watches over the pavilion relates in Hindi the story of Bhagiratha to each pilgrim who stops to contemplate the statue and revere the footprint. The story that the brahman told on the day that I heard it was essentially the same, though much abridged, as the account of Bhagiratha given in the *Ramayana* of Valmiki, which was completed in the second century CE.[27] According to the story Bhagiratha performed severe austerities for two reasons. First, he wanted to persuade the purifying celestial Ganga to descend to earth to cleanse 60,000 of his deceased ancestors of their sins. Secondly, he was childless and was desperate for divine help in obtaining an heir. One of his austerities was to stand on one foot worshipping Shiva for a year, leaving the single footprint in the stone now under the pavilion. The deities Brahma, Ganga and Shiva were so impressed by Bhagiratha's devotion that they granted him his wishes. Brahma satisfied his desire for children. The heavenly river agreed to descend to earth at the place where Bhagiratha was performing his austerities and to wash away the sins of his ancestors. Shiva allowed the Ganga to gush from the sky onto his head, in this way saving the earth from being shattered by the violence of her fall. It is from this event that Gangotri takes its name, the word being explained as a combination of Ganga and a participle from the Hindi verb *utarnā* 'to come down' with the meaning 'place where the Ganga came down'.[28]

The more devout pilgrims and the brahmans who assist them need no more proof than the footprint in stone that the sacred complex at Gangotri marks the spot where Bhagiratha brought the Ganga down to earth. But even they must admit that the physical Bhagirathi River does not begin at Gangotri. The river, wide and swift, obviously originates somewhere further upstream.

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The Ganga: A threefold perception

James Fraser reports that none of the people whom he met in Gangotri doubted that the Bhagirathi River flowing by the temple rises from a mass of snow among the high peaks some distance away. A few of Fraser's interlocutors went so far as to assert that 'when climbing in search of stray sheep they had seen the glen of the river ending thus and could discern the deep ravine through which it trickles down into its bed from the snowy basin'.[29] Fraser goes on to say that when the pundit at the temple at Gangotri was asked if the Ganga really and visibly came down from heaven, he replied that no such thing happened and that the river in truth came from the snows among the mountains further upstream because, as was obvious to the eye, it could not well be otherwise.

If the brahmans who maintained the sacred complex at Gangotri in James Fraser's day knew perfectly well that the Bhagirathi River rises in the snows—in modern parlance, in a glacier—further upstream, then one must assume that their descendants today have the same knowledge. Yet, in 2003 the Semwal brahman relating the story of how King Bhagiratha brought the celestial Ganga down to earth at the bathing ghat just a few steps away clearly expected that the pilgrims listening to him would accept his narrative as fact. Unless he was a complete hypocrite, the brahman must have been convinced of the truth of the story, too. In order to solve this conundrum of how intelligent human beings can believe something utterly at variance with what their eyes tell them, one should consider the statement of David Zurick and Julsun Pacheco that 'Hindu pilgrim-travellers to the sacred mountain places seek not a physical place so much as a metaphorical one.'[30]

Applying Zurick and Pacheco's insight to the Gangotri conundrum, the Ganga that falls from the sky is, for pilgrims and priests alike, a metaphor with two aspects. In one aspect it is a metaphor for the flow of spiritual purification from the transcendent world of sacred perfection to our profane existence flawed by sickness and guilt. In the other aspect it is a metaphor for the translation of divinity from mythological time and place into our mundane, mortal awareness. This metaphorical flow in its two aspects merges into the physical Bhagirathi River which continues on to its confluence downstream with the Alaknanda River at Devprayag to form the Ganga River. There is no contradiction between the metaphorical river and the material river for those who can perceive both.

The rise of the Bhagirathi River from Gangotri Glacier 18 kilometres east of the town of Gangotri can be observed by anyone able to go there. But the

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metaphorical descent of the divine, purifying Ganga into the bed of the Bhagirathi River at Gangotri can only be experienced through an enhanced perception.[31]

How one might cultivate a perception sufficiently enhanced to recognise in the material Ganga its two metaphorical aspects is, fortunately, not a mystery. For guidance in cultivating this perception one need only turn to compositions by two men, each a pivotal figure in Indian cultural history. The first composition is a Sanskrit treatise entitled *Siddhāntamuktāvalī*, 'the pearl necklace of doctrines', by the sixteenth century Hindu devotional (*bhakti*) philosopher and religious reformer Vallabha (1478–1530), also known as Vallabhacharya.[32] The second is an untitled poem, one of several in praise of the Ganga, by the Maithili[33] poet Vidyapati (c.1360–c.1448), a man of intuition with an appreciation of worldly life.[34] The two compositions fit neatly together, Vallabha's being oriented to the intellect while Vidyapati's approach is through the emotions. Both compositions are focused on the Ganga.

Vallabha begins his analysis of perception in the fifth verse of his *Siddhāntamuktāvalī* by explaining that Brahman, a key concept of Hindu philosophy, has two aspects: one aspect is the material universe of multiplicity and the other is the impersonal spirit of unity that pervades that multiplicity. In the same way, Vallabha goes on to say, the Ganga River has two aspects: one is material water and the other is the spiritual power, *māhātmya*, that is in that water. In order to perceive the spiritual aspect of Brahman as unity and of the Ganga as *māhātmya* one must observe the laws of correct behaviour promulgated in Hindu scripture.

In order to be aware of the third aspect of the Ganga, the divine, Vallabha holds that one's perception must be enhanced with devotion. When the requisite devotion is present, one will perceive the manifestation of the goddess in the Ganga and that manifestation will be seen as identical with the river. With this statement, Vallabha emphasizes that the three aspects of the Ganga are not to be seen as independent from one another but as simultaneously present in a single whole. Vallabha also makes clear that when one's perception is so enhanced that it encompasses all three aspects of the Ganga, then one's experience has moved into a dimension of satisfaction that is beyond the rewards that result from adherence to the rules laid down in scripture.

In the ninth verse of his treatise Vallabha concludes his analysis by reiterating that water is the material aspect of the Ganga just as the universe is the material aspect of Brahman; the power to bestow success and liberation is the spiritual aspect of the Ganga just as Brahman is the spirit of unity in the universe and the divine aspect of the Ganga is the goddess, just as Krishna,

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whom Vallabha accepted as his personal god and the supreme being, is the divine aspect of Brahman.

The relevant verses of Vallabha's *Siddhāntamuktāvalī* are, in my translation, as follows:

> The Veda explains that it is the nature of Brahman to become the universe
> And so Brahman is to be known in two aspects—just as one aspect of the Ganga is water
> And the other aspect, possessing great spiritual power, bestows enjoyment and liberation on those who honour it.
> This aspect of the Ganga and of Brahman is to be perceived in accordance with the scriptural law of propriety.
>
> Then, through devotion, a manifestation of the goddess sometimes appears—
> Especially if she is perceived in the Ganga as identical with the flow of water;
>
> Even for those who can't see her there may be, through her, satisfaction of desires in the water—
> That satisfaction is different from what is received according to the rules of scripture.
>
> Just as water has been said to be, so is the universe, just as the possessor of spiritual power has been said to be, so is Brahman,
> And just as the goddess Ganga has been said to be, so is Krishna.[35]

In these verses Vallabha has given a series of precepts, as a teacher might do in instructing a student. Vidyapati, in contrast, offered his guidance from his own life experience. His poem, taking up where Vallabha's analysis leaves off, begins by praising the Ganga's purity and virtue as divine mother. After his praise Vidyapati asks the Ganga goddess to forgive him for his sin of offending her purity by touching her water with his impure feet in the course of ritual bathing. With this image Vidyapati confronts the fundamental problem of human interaction with the divine: how can a human being who is inherently part of the world of fallibility perceive the Ganga goddess who belongs to the transcendent plane of the divine. No human action like penance, meditation or yoga can accomplish this. Only love, according to Vidyapati, can attract divine acceptance.

This is Vidyapati's poem:

> I found the essence of happiness on your banks,
> Tears flowed from my eyes when I left you.

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I fold my hands in homage to you whose waves are pure,
O Ganga, full of virtue, may I again gaze upon you,
Please forgive my sin which you know well:
Mother, my feet have touched your water—
But why would I do penance, meditation and yoga
When just by bathing once in your waters my life has been fulfilled.
Full of love for the Ganga Vidyapati says:
'Don't forget me at the time of my death.'[36]

Whether or not every Hindu pilgrim and priest in the sacred complex at Gangotri actually perceives the spiritual and the divine aspects of the Ganga in the flow of the material Bhagirathi River is, of course, impossible to say. What one can say is that within the Hindu cultural matrix there are clear instructions, as given by authoritative authors like Vallabha and Vidyapati, for the accomplishment of that perception.

Gomukh

The place where the Bhagirathi—and therefore the Ganga—rises is 18 kilometres up a footpath along the river to the east of Gangotri and is known by the name Gomukh, from the Sanskrit *gomukha* 'cow's mouth', or its variants Gaumukh or Gomukhi. Travellers to Gomukh need stamina and a certain sang-froid, whether they are on foot or muleback, to attempt the trip. The path rises steadily in altitude as it twists over jagged ridges and clings to sheer precipices heart-wrenchingly high above the river below. Along the way the traveller is either alerted or unnerved by a series of warning signs in Hindi, with their phrasing in a rather incongruous mixture of courtesy and foreboding, like these examples in English translation:

Slippery Ahead Please Go Very Slowly

Don't Let Fire Start in the Forests

Beware! The Path Is Narrow Please Go Carefully

Careful! Pieces of Rock Have Fallen on the Path Please Go Slowly and Cautiously

Beware! The Path is Narrow Please Go Single-File

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The travellers from Gangotri to Gomukh fall into four broad groups. One is made up of sadhus who stride along purposefully, in pairs or singly, hair and beard uncut and mien rather fearsome. These might be called professional pilgrims for, homeless and untrammelled by possessions, they lead lives of unending pilgrimage. Then there are the tourists, like the friendly middle-aged couple from Hyderabad whom I met on the way, who have come to enjoy the spectacular scenery of the high Himalaya. They delight in the wilderness with its forests, flowers, lizards and occasional herds of bharal wild sheep. Next come the hiking enthusiasts, young men and women of privileged background outfitted in the latest mountaineering gear, relishing the chance to test their physical endurance free of warm but cloying family security. Most of those in these three groups may well have religious reasons for making the journey to Gomukh, but their religiosity is well-tempered by other interests and expectations. The fourth group is by far the largest. It comprises people of both sexes, all ages and every social and economic class. Whatever their station in life at home may be, while on the way to Gomukh they are pilgrims through and through. The inspiration for their pilgrimage, which can be read in their eyes and on their faces, is a piety that may be abstract and unworldly or it may be pragmatic and full of self-interest, but it is piety nevertheless. Some of them will remain in my memory forever. There was the gnarled old man and lively little girl of six or seven walking hand in hand, both of them in clothing and rubber sandals painfully unsuited for the rigours of a Himalayan trek. And there was the well-off, somewhat overweight family gamely making the best of the new and undignified experience of being loaded on mules and driven along a steep and treacherous path by hard-bitten Garhwali muleteers. Finally, and most poignant, was the man with a crudely bandaged foot hobbling with the aid of a staff along the path littered with sharp stones and gravel. He and his companion were the only pilgrims I saw putting into practice the traditional directive to make the journey on this holy ground barefoot.[37]

While the walk to Gomukh is not an easy one, there is a definite feeling of camaraderie evidenced by shouts of Hari Om! with which travellers of every group—except the sadhus, aloof in their disdain for ordinary humans—greet each other as they meet coming and going on the narrow path. One must cover the 14 kilometres through country entirely uninhabited to Bhojvasa, where basic accommodation is available in either a government rest house or an ashram, by nightfall. The following morning, after four more kilometres clambering over glacial moraine, surrounded and overwhelmed by the splendour of mountains

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like Shivling at 6,543 metres, Vasuki Parbat at 6,792 metres and, especially, the tallest of the three Bhagirathi peaks at 6,856 metres above sea-level, the traveller reaches Gomukh. Gomukh itself is three caves in the base of the wall of dirt, stones and ice that is the snout of Gangotri Glacier. From the Gomukh ice caves rushes the Bhagirathi River, already a substantial stream of some 12 metres in width. Gomukh, at 3,880 metres in altitude, is in a landscape that is magnificent but utterly barren with absolutely no vegetation. The thin, cold air makes breathing laborious for those unaccustomed to the altitude. In defiance of this hostile environment a handful of sadhus have pitched their tents.

It happened that one of these sadhus, after he had assisted some pilgrims in scooping up sacred Ganga water—Ganga *jal*—in plastic containers to take home for use in religious ceremonies, strolled over to me. This presented the perfect opportunity for me to ask a question that had been troubling me ever since I had left Gangotri. Despite the harsh surroundings, lack of a temple and absence of any religious story associated with Gomukh, why consistently over the years do around a third of those who come to Gangotri go on to Gomukh?[38] Why do they, unlike most pilgrims to Gangotri, not feel that their pilgrimage is complete with a dip in the river at the bathing ghat, homage to Bhagiratha's statue and footprint and worship of Gangaji's image in her temple with *arati* in the evening?

The sadhu, whose name was Jairamdas, gave this answer to my question, which I have put into English:

> The real Gomukh from which the Ganga rises cannot be reached as it is 25 kilometres further back under the ice of Gangotri Glacier at the base of the three Bhagirathi peaks. It is enough to go to Shri Ganga Mandir in Gangotri to wash away all of your sins but if you *really* want to get rid of your sins you have to come to this Gomukh right here. Here all your sins will vanish and you will also be blessed with children.

With a nod both to the standard Hindu view that religious mortification can bring progeny and remission of sin and to the scientific position that the Ganga is generated deep within the glacier from which it comes, Jairamdas identifies the reason why it is essential for some of the pilgrims who go to Gangotri to go on to Gomukh: worship at the sacred complex at Gangotri is sufficient to wash away one's sins, but to be absolutely certain to be free of sin it is necessary to come to Gomukh.

As befits a sadhu, Jairamdas's answer is concise and unadorned. Perhaps, though, a brief commentary on his words is not out of place. The first visitors to

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Gangotri to leave a record of their visit noted that from a distant period lost in the mists of time a small but constant stream of hardy pilgrims had been coming to that place during the summer months. Until the final decades of the twentieth century a pilgrimage to Gangotri meant long distances to be covered on foot over a path fraught with suffering, hardship and the ever-present possibility of death from cold, starvation, avalanche and landslide.[39] Moreover, a century or two ago the climate in the entire Himalayan region was considerably colder than it is at present. For instance, glaciologists have estimated that in 1780 Gangotri Glacier would have extended two kilometres further down the Bhagirathi Valley toward Bhojvasa than it does today.[40] In those times a pilgrimage to Gangotri was a matter of extreme penance in which the pilgrim's survival often hung in the balance.

Then, stimulated by the Sino-Indian War of 1962, the Indian government built a road into the Garhwal Himalaya for military use.[41] In time, a branch of this road reached Gangotri. At the same time, economic conditions in India were beginning to improve. Middle-class and lower middle-class Hindus began to acquire the financial means to engage in travel for pleasure, tourism, in combination with pilgrimage to distant sacred places. With its new road, traditional sanctity and scenic beauty, Gangotri was an ideal destination for the emerging industry of mass, commercialized pilgrimage tourism taking shape in India.

It is wonderful to be able to get off a bus or out of one's car in the parking area of Gangotri and walk the short distance to the sacred complex free of stress or struggle. There, ritual bathing and homage to Ganga in her temple are straightforward and effortless. But stopping at the pavilion where Bhagiratha's statue and his footprint are displayed may cause anxiety to rise in the pilgrim's mind. The message of the story of Bhagiratha is that one may be blessed by a deity with children and freedom from sin only if one is first willing to undergo suffering and penance. Going to Gangotri on a bus might be gruelling and unpleasant but does it entail enough suffering and penance to qualify one for release from sin? Walking—barefoot if one's sins are serious enough—for two or three days back and forth over a rough track on the Gangotri to Gomukh pilgrimage should satisfy the requirement for suffering and penance. That is what, in my opinion, Jairamdas meant when he said, 'It is enough to go to Shri Ganga Mandir in Gangotri to wash away all of your sins but if you *really* want to get rid of your sins you have to come to this Gomukh right here.'

Jairamdas helped me understand that the need for suffering and penance explains why the journey to Gomukh makes a pilgrimage to Gangotri complete, but he did not touch on how it happened that Gomukh came to be located at the

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snout of Gangotri Glacier. After all, the topography of the Bhagirathi Valley above Gangotri made a journey to Gomukh impossible for all but experienced explorers and alpinists until the final decades of the twentieth century. Nevertheless, in the eighteenth century there was a place called Gomukh at Gangotri. The history of the way that Gomukh—and also Gangotri—came to be where they are today is a fascinating record of the way in which a pilgrimage place can move over time.

Gangotri and Gomukh in history

The names Gangotri and Gomukh do not occur in the Valmiki *Ramayana* narrative of Bhagiratha's bringing the Ganga to earth. Instead of either Gangotri or Gomukh, the *Ramayana* gives the location of Bhagiratha's austerities as a place called Gokarna,[42] a Sanskrit word that means 'cow's ear'. It is tempting to look for a connection between *gokarna*, 'cow's ear', and *gomukha*, 'cow's mouth' that would allow the story of Bhagiratha recorded some 2,000 years ago to be linked geographically with the Gangotri–Gomukh pilgrimage sites of today. A search for a link is not fruitless, for the two words have a connection through the worship of Shiva.

Gokarna, which appears in the *Mahabharata* as an epithet of Shiva,[43] is the name of two towns—one in Karnataka state in India and one in Nepal—with renowned temples sacred to Shiva and in the past was the Sanskrit name of the Sri Lankan city of Trincomalee which also has a famous Shaiva temple.

Gomukha has three meanings with religious connotations, one of them with a strong association with Shiva. In the first sense, a *gomukha* is the sock-shaped cloth bag used to conceal a Hindu rosary when it is being counted[44] and, in the second, it signifies the stone or metal figure of a cow's head through which the headwaters, real or figurative, of rivers in central India are sometimes channelled.[45] In the third it designates a metal vessel in the shape of a cow's head that is suspended over a linga in some temples dedicated to Shiva. The vessel is filled with water and fitted with a contrivance to allow the liquid to dribble in a slow stream out of the mouth of the metal cow's head to lustrate the linga below. An example of a *gomukha* in the third sense from seventeenth century Orissa is in the collection of the Museum of Asian Civilisations in Singapore.[46]

As has been mentioned earlier, in the eighteenth century an anonymous traveller and a sadhu, Purana Poori, were the first to leave accounts of a visit to

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Gangotri. In the traveller's description, as recounted in the geography of India which was written by Joseph Tieffenthaller in Latin and published in French translation in 1786, Gomukh and Gangotri are not two different places as they are now but rather are variant names for the same place. The English translation of Tieffenthaller's Latin is as follows:

> Gangotri or the cataract of the Ganga, which they also call the Cow's Mouth, falls from a cliff headlong into a pit wide and deep.[47]

Purana Poori does not make any reference to Gomukh but he does say that at Gangotri he observed a statue of King Bhagiratha 'where the river may be leaped over'.[48]

The only place in the vicinity of the modern town of Gangotri where there is a cataract on the Bhagirathi that could conceivably be jumped over is the defile through which the Bhagirathi River rushes on the way to its plunge down to Gaurikund as I have described at the beginning of this article. Nitya Nand and Kamlesh Kumar portray this defile vividly as where the 'Bhagirathi makes three foaming and roaring waterfalls and then just beneath the last waterfall takes a plunge into a slit-like canyon which is hardly a metre wide for some distance. Frequently boulders get tucked up in the narrow canyon. It is so deep and narrow that water is hardly visible from the top at various places'.[49]

On the basis of the testimonies of Tieffenthaller's informant and Purana Poori, it seems that in the eighteenth century Gangotri and Gomukh were alternate names for the defile of the Bhagirathi above Gaurikund. Corroboration for this hypothesis comes from the Webb expedition's munshi who in 1808 gave the third account of Gangotri. In his description of the temple built by Amar Singh Thapa, the munshi says that the temple was built not *at* Gangotri but *near* Gangotri.[50] If at the time of the munshi's visit Gangotri was not the name of the location of the temple, then it was probably, as was the case when Tieffenthaller's traveller and Purana Poori were there, the name of the defile of the Bhagirathi some 200 metres downstream from the temple.

Like Thieffenthaller's informant, but unlike Purana Poori, the munshi mentions a place called Gomukh at Gangotri. But, while Thieffenthaller's traveller reported Gomukh, in its Latin translation *os vaccae*, to be another name for the Gangotri defile, the munshi had a very different version of what and where Gomukh was. He said that Gomukh—which he called Gaumukh—is 'a large stone situated in the middle of the bed [of the river]; the water passes on each side, but a small piece of the fragment is disclosed above the surface,

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to which fancy may attach the idea of the object, a cow' and he situated it two miles [3.2 kilometres] beyond Gangotri, without stipulating whether it was upstream or downstream.[51] While there is no large stone at the present time in the Bhagirathi River at or near Gangotri that answers to the munshi's description—not surprising considering the geological instability of the Himalayan region—it is at least possible that the munshi's account is a distorted description of the defile of the Bhagirathi. Another possibility is that the munshi was relaying a report of the natural Shivalinga rumoured to lie under the surface of the Bhagirathi just before it falls into Gaurikund[52] at the same place where Tieffenthaller's Gangotri–Gomukh was located.

If the accounts of Tieffenthaller's informant, Purana Poori and Webb's munshi are collated, this is the picture that emerges of Gangotri, Gomukh and Amar Singh Thapa's temple in the first decade of the nineteenth century. The place where the heavenly Ganga falls to earth, marked by a statue of the king who brought it down, was at the Gangotri cataract or defile of the Bhagirathi River. Directly under the flow of water through the crevice of the defile was a natural Shivalinga, either real or mythical, over which the water ran into Gaurikund. Since the shape of the crevice and its function in channelling the sacred water over the Shivalinga was reminiscent either of the *gomukha* that drips water onto a Shivalinga or else of the *gomukha* through which the headwaters of a river are sometimes sent, the Gangotri cataract was called Gomukh. When Amar Singh Thapa built the temple to the Ganga on the Bhagirathi in 1806 or 1807, he built it some distance upstream from the Gangotri cataract—perhaps because at the cataract there was not enough space for a building.

When the munshi arrived only a year or two after the construction of the temple, the name Gangotri was still used for the cataract and not for the temple site. Along with the image of the goddess Ganga in the temple, the munshi says there was also an image of Bhagirathi (*sic*).[53] Since all modern accounts say there is an image of Bhagiratha in Shri Ganga Mandir, but never of Bhagirathi, I assume that 'Bhagirathi' is an error for Bhagiratha made in the transcription of the munshi's account. One might speculate that the image of Bhagiratha that Amar Singh Thapa had installed in his new Ganga temple was the statue that had formerly stood at the Gangotri defile.

James Fraser, who came to Gangotri seven years after the munshi, arrived well aware of Tieffenthaller's description of the Cow's Mouth and of the munshi's account of the Gaumukh rock in the Bhagirathi. He also mentions that he had heard of a Persian author who, in a biography of the Central Asian conqueror Timur, mentioned that the Ganga was said to issue 'from a mass of rock or stone

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in the form of a cow' that is venerated by the Hindus.[54] Unfortunately, Fraser does not supply the name either of the author or his biography or the date the biography was composed. When he found neither a rock answering the description of the munshi's Gaumukh nor any other place at Gangotri called Gomukh, he asked a pundit at the Ganga temple about the Gomukh. The pundit, according to Fraser, replied with a laugh and assured him that there was no truth in stories told by pilgrims from the plains about the source of the Ganga in a Gomukh.[55] Why the pundit chose to laugh and give no credence to the existence of Gomukh is a question that cannot be answered now. It can be said, though, that when Fraser made his visit the name Gangotri was applied to the site of the Ganga temple and no longer designated the defile above Gaurikund. In Fraser's own words:

> A gunshot below Gungotree, the Kedar Gunga, a rapid and considerable stream, debouches into the Bhagiruttee, at a place called Goureecounda; and this is a holy place, where a[n]....ablution is usually performed before Gungotree can be approached.[56]

From Fraser's day until the present Gangotri has been the name of the section of the river centred on the sacred complex. By extension, the town is called by the same name.

The next visitors to record their journey to Gangotri were Captain J.A. Hodgson and Lieutenant Herbert of the East India Company's Native Infantry who arrived in May 1817 on a mission to explore and survey the course of the Ganga within the Himalaya Mountains. Hodgson knew of Fraser's account of Gangotri and his brief description of the sacred site and temple does not differ from Fraser's. No doubt influenced by Fraser, he does not mention any attempt to find a place called Gomukh around Gangotri. Nevertheless, Hodgson is the person who fixed the position of Gomukh where it is today. He and Herbert, together with a Gangotri brahman, were the first people known to have reached what is now called Gangotri Glacier and to have seen the ice cave from which the Bhagirathi River has its source. When he beheld the cave in the snout of the glacier, Hodgson recognised it as the Cow's Mouth—Gomukh—in these words:

> The Bhagirathi or Ganges issues from under a very low arch at the foot of a grand snow bed. The river is here bounded to the right and left by high snow and rocks, but in front over the debouche the mass of snow is perfectly perpendicular and from the bed of the stream to the summit we estimate the thickness at little less than 300 feet [91.4 metres] of solid frozen snow, probably the accumulation of ages....The Gangotri Brahman who came with us.... had never heard of such a place as actually

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existing nor had he or any other person to his knowledge ever been here. In modern times they may not but Hindus of research may formerly have been here and if so I cannot think of any place to which they might more aptly give the name of a Cow's Mouth than to this extraordinary Debouche.[57]

The next traveller keeping a diary, Thomas Skinner, reached Gangotri at the end of the 1820s. He notes that at the bathing place by the Ganga temple at Gangotri phials are filled with Ganga water and sealed by the brahmans for sale in the rest of India. He also gives evidence that Gomukh for some pilgrims was still a location on the Bhagirathi below Gangotri when he quotes his brahman guide as relating that in the present corrupt age of the world what had in earlier ages been an easy journey to the source of the Ganga has become a difficult trip 'through the cow's mouth to the heights of Gangotri'.[58]

Hodgson's recognition of the glacial ice cave from which the Bhagirathi flows out into the world as the Cow's Mouth was accepted by geographers. By the last decades of the nineteenth century it appears in the form Gaumukh as the name for 'the glacier cavern from which the head-waters [of the Ganga] issue on the melting of the ice and snow'.[59]

For a time in the early part of the twentieth century the glacier that gives rise to the Bhagirathi was known after the ice cave in its snout as Gaumukh Glacier,[60] but by the 1930s it was being called Gangotri Glacier.[61] From that time to the present the name Gomukh has been restricted to the cave or caves in the snout of Gangotri Glacier. Although the two names, Gangotri Glacier and Gomukh at the glacier's snout, were applied by modern travellers and geographers and do not come down through tradition, both are now established as place names in sacred as well as secular topography.

Gangotri, Gomukh and the sources of the Ganga

For an unchronicled span of centuries pilgrims had to endure extreme physical suffering and personal sacrifice just to reach the place where in transcendent time King Bhagiratha had obtained freedom from sin and acquired offspring through penance. At that place, whether it was at the cataract on the Bhagirathi River above Gaurikund as it was 250 years ago, or at the sacred complex around Amar Singh Thapa's Ganga temple as it was 200 years ago, or, as it has been for the past century, at the same complex but centred on the

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new Shri Ganga Mandir, pilgrims could emulate Bhagiratha and perceive the material, spiritual and divine Ganga in the river before them.

When motor vehicles could transport large numbers of visitors to the edge of Gangotri in recent times, a need for a more penitential pilgrimage was felt by some and the footpath to Gomukh in the snout of Gangotri Glacier was opened to pilgrims.

At this point, when both the material and the metaphorical sources of the Ganga could be attained if one had the physical strength to reach the one and the enhanced perception to partake of the other, another problem arose. This was the crisis caused by the tremendous increase in a very short time in the number of pilgrims and other visitors. Such numbers of people and the waste they generate put an intolerable strain on the primitive sanitary and other facilities available in Gangotri and on the track to Gomukh.

Concern that an ecological disaster was imminent led to efforts to awaken the religious leaders in Gangotri, people in business there, pilgrims and the state and central governments to the need for prompt and decisive action. Signs like the one translated at the beginning of this article exhorted pilgrims to 'Keep the water of the Ganga clean' and 'Let clean water be the right of every Indian'. Remedial measures by private citizens and governments were started and continue, but they are still far too limited, uncoordinated and slow.[62]

The research of scholars like Kelly D. Alley on ecological problems much further downstream on the Ganga that are similar to those at Gangotri and Gomukh, suggests that religious and political leaders have great difficulty in gathering the will and resources to confront pervasive environmental challenges. It is Alley's prediction that, 'If environmental activism continues to develop in India, it will likely expand out of coalitions between nongovernmental activists and public interest lawyers long before it does so at the crossroads of religious and political movements.'[63]

Alley's view has been borne out by the successes of activists and their lawyer allies in India and in the world in general in galvanising the public outcry and protest that is vital if ecological degradation is to be reversed. But, at the same time, one should not overlook the positive effect that a religious perspective can have in making environmental progress. Vidyapati acknowledged the innate human tendency to pollute when he asked the Ganga as divine mother to forgive his sin of contaminating her water. Such acceptance of personal responsibility is essential if the environmental crisis at Gangotri is to be averted. Vallabha unequivocally stated that the goddess should be 'perceived in the Ganga as identical with the flow of water'. From an environmental

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point of view, at pilgrimage places like Gangotri and Gomukh the material aspect of the flow of water must be given attention equal to that given to the divine.

For religious minds like those of Vidyapati and Vallabha the material, spiritual and divine sources of the Ganga, like all holy and profane things around us, are equally subject to our pollution and equally worthy of our heed.

Notes

1. My journeys to Gangotri and Gomukh were much enlivened by my friend and colleague Yogendra Yadav on the first trip and by my wife Nonie Barz on the second. I am also grateful to Nonie for her insightful comments on this article during its preparation.

2. Kuldip Singh Gulia, *Discovering Himalaya: Tourism of Himalayan Region*, vol. 1, Delhi: Isha, 2007, pp. 132–3.

3. This and all subsequent English translations from Hindi or Sanskrit are by the author unless otherwise noted.

4. A photograph of Shri Ganga Mandir at Gangotri can be seen at http://www.flickr.com/photos/12438325@N07/3612767063/

5. Gulia, vol. 1, pp. 134–5.

6. Joseph Tieffenthaller and Jean Bernoulli, *Déscription historique et géographique de l'Inde*, vol.1, *La géographie de l'Indostan, écrite en Latin, dans le pays même, par le père, Joseph Tieffenthaler*, Berlin: Chrétien Sigismond Spener, 1786, p. 280.

7. Jonathan Duncan, 'An Account of Two Fakeers with Their Portraits', *Asiatick Researches or Transactions*, Society Instituted in Bengal for Enquiring into the History and Antiquities, the Arts, Sciences, and Literature of Asia, London, 5 (1807), p. 43.

8. Ganesh Saili, *Glorious Garhwal*, New Delhi: Roli, 1995, p. 59.

9. Ajay S. Rawat, *History of Garhwal 1358–1947*, New Delhi: Indus, 1989, pp. 73–74.

10. F.V. Raper, 'Narrative of a Survey for the Purpose of Discovering the Sources of the Ganges', *Asiatick Researches*, 11 (1812), p. 506.

11. James B. Fraser, *Notes from the Journal of a Tour through Part of the Snowy Range of the Himala Mountains and to the Sources of the Rivers Jumna and Ganges*, London: Rodwell and Martin, 1820, pp. 42–43.

12. James B. Fraser, 'Account of a Journey to the Sources of the Jumna and Bhagirathi Rivers', *Asiatick Researches*, 13 (1820), p. 224.

13. Jagmohan Mahajan, *The Ganga Trail: Foreign Accounts and Sketches of the River Scene*, Varanasi: Indica, 2004, plate XXVIII.

14. Fraser, *Notes*, p. 467.

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15. Barbara Spode, 'To Gangotri and Gomukh 1980 and 1995', unpublished journal, 2010.

16. Stephen Alter, *Sacred Waters: A Pilgrimage up the Ganges River to the Source of Hindu Culture*, New York: Harcourt, 2001, pp. 172–3.

17. Ashim Kumar Roy, *History of the Jaipur City*, New Delhi: Manohar, 1978, p. 232.

18. Jadunath Sarkar, *A History of Jaipur, c.1503–1938*, Raghubir Sinh, rev. and ed., Hyderabad: Orient Longman, 1984, p. 375.

19. Roy, p. 232; Saritā Śāh, *Uttarākhaṇḍ mē Ādhyātmik Paryaṭan: Mandir evam Tirth*, New Delhi: Diamond, 2001, p. 183.

20. Mahajan, p. 106 and plate XXIX.

21. J.A. Hodgson, 'Journal of a Survey to the Heads of the Rivers, Ganges and Jumna' *Asiatick Researches,* 14 (1822), p. 98; Thomas Skinner, *Excursions in India Including a Walk over the Himalaya Mountains to the Sources of the Jumna and the Ganges*, vol. 2, London: Richard Bentley, 1833, p. 58.

22. Fraser, 'Account', p. 224.

23. Śāh, p. 183.

24. Fraser, 'Account', p. 224.

25. Mahajan, plate XXVIII.

26. Mildred Archer, *Visions of India: Sketchbooks of William Simpson 1859–62*, Oxford: Phaidon, 1986, p. 111.

27. Robert P. Goldman, *The Rāmāyaṇa of Vālmīki: An Epic of Ancient India*, vol.1, Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1984, pp. 197–208.

28. Śāh, p. 181.

29. Fraser, 'Account', pp. 227–9.

30. David Zurick and Julsun Pacheco, *Illustrated Atlas of the Himalaya*, Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2006, p. 145.

31. Richard Barz, 'Hagiography', in *Encyclopedia of Hinduism*, K. Jacobsen et al., eds, vol. 2, Leiden: Brill, 2010, p. 238.

32. Richard Barz, 'Kumbhandas: The Devotee as Salt of the Earth', in *Krishna: A Sourcebook*, Edwin Bryant, ed., New York: Oxford University Press, 2007, pp. 477–82.

33. Maithili, a language related to Hindi, is spoken in north-eastern Bihar in India and in the neighbouring areas of Nepal.

34. N.H. Zide and S.M. Pandey, 'Songs of Vidyāpati: A New Translation', *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, 85 (1965), pp. 197–204.

35. The Sanskrit text with another English translation is in James D. Redington, *The Grace of Lord Krishna: The Sixteen Verse-Treatises* (Ṣoḍaśagranthaḥ) *of Vallabhacharya*, Delhi: Indian Books Centre, 2000, pp. 27–8.

36. The Maithili text is in G. Juyāl and Viśvambhar, *Vidyāpati Vaibhav*, Agra: Vinod Pustak Mandir, 1971, p. 103.

37. Fraser, 'Account', p. 219.

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38. Gulia, vol. 1, p. 134.

39. H.T. Colebrooke, 'On the Sources of the Ganges in the Himádri or Emodus', *Asiatick Researches*, 11(1812), pp. 434–5; Hodgson. p. 110.

40. Lewis Owen and Milap Sharma, 'Rates and Magnitudes of Paraglacial Fan Formation in the Garhwal Himalaya: Implications for Landscape Evolution', *Geomorphology*, 26 (1998), p. 179.

41. Alter, p. 170.

42. Goldman, vol. 1, p. 204.

43. Monier Monier-Williams, *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1974 [1899], p. 364.

44. Ibid.

45. Anne Feldhaus, *Water and Womanhood: Religious Meanings of Rivers in Maharashtra*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1995, pp. 46–7.

46. Gauri Krishnan, *The Divine Within: Art and Living Culture of India and South Asia*, Singapore: Asian Civilisations Museum, 2007, p. 157.

47. Original text in Colebrooke, p. 433. I am indebted to my colleague at the Australian National University Elizabeth Minchin for her help with the English translation of the original Latin.

48. Duncan, p. 43.

49. Nitya Nand and Kamlesh Kumar, *The Holy Himalaya: A Geographical Interpretation of Garhwal*, Delhi: Daya, 1989, p. 39.

50. Raper, p. 506.

51. Ibid.

52. Śāh, p. 184.

53. Raper, p. 506.

54. Fraser, *Notes*, pp. 473–4.

55. Ibid., p. 474.

56. Ibid., p. 460.

57. Hodgson, p. 117.

58. Skinner, vol. 2, p. 70.

59. Edwin Atkinson, *The Himalayan Gazetteer*, vol. 3, part 1, Delhi: Cosmo, 1973 [1882], p. 237.

60. H.G. Walton, *United Provinces of Agra and Oudh District Gazetteers*, vol. 36: *British Garhwal*, Allahabad: Superintendent of Government Printing, 1910, p. 215.

61. Jack Gibson, *As I Saw It: Records of a Crowded Life in India 1937–1969*, New Delhi: Mukul Prakashan, 1976, p. 31.

62. Gulia, vol. 1, p. 133.

63. Kelly D. Alley, 'Separate Domains: Hinduism, Politics, and Environmental Pollution', in *Hinduism and Ecology: The Intersection of Earth, Sky, and Water*, C. Chapple and M.E. Tucker, eds, Cambridge, MA: Center for the Study of World Religions, Harvard Divinity School, 2000, p. 381.

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Hello Boat! The River Economy in Banaras[1]

Assa Doron

> We have been living in the regal court of Ganga since time immemorial (*Hum log anant kaal se Ganga ka darbar mei rhete hai*).
>
> —Shambu Manjhi

'*Hello! Boat? Hello! Boat? Hello! Boat? Hello! Boat?*' These are the words that echo around, spoken from ten, twenty mouths as you step onto the ghats of Banaras. '*Hello! Boat? Hello! Boat?*' After continuous repetitions, the words have a lingering effect, much like an insidious jingle that refuses to fade, puncturing the spiritual ambience of the riverfront. As customers what we fail to understand is why, after so many rebuttals, the boatmen continue to beseech us with the same nagging question. Indeed, the unfavourable initial encounter between boatmen and tourists seems at odds with what we would commonly expect from service providers, in terms of the courtesy and responsiveness to market and consumer needs, characteristic of the tourist service industry in the West.

But there is more to the story than that. The two words—*Hello! Boat?*—encompass the complexity of the informal institution of boating: a work system used by boatmen operating along the ghats of Banaras and based on customary rules and regulations—something I describe as a moral economy. It is unlikely that the following account of the boatmen's work system will offer any consolation to those tourists visiting Banaras. However, I do suggest that there is a certain logic underpinning this pestering practice, derived from the boatmen's own unique social and spatial arrangements on the riverfront.

The concept of 'moral economy' was made famous by the work of E.P. Thompson and James Scott, both of whom sought to delineate the transition from embedded economies (pre-capitalist/peasant) to free market economies

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as a traumatic one for the poor.[2] Under the aegis of the moral economy subsistence for the poor was socially guaranteed. Norms of reciprocity and redistribution meant that the poor could rely on the ruling and more prosperous classes to ensure minimum income during desperate times. Subsistence was seen as a social right, and it was the notion of social justice and moral obligations, rather than strict rational economic reasoning, that underpinned economic action and goals. With the expansion of capitalism and colonial rule, such moral economies were strained, some experiencing a breakdown culminating in protests and riots by those who suffered the most—the poor and disadvantaged.

The notion of a 'moral economy' can explain the boatmen's own definition of justice, norms and rights. The state's intervention into the lives and practices of boatmen and its expropriation of their most valued resource—the Ganga—is a case in point. By severely restricting access to the river, fishing and the agricultural land along the riverbanks, the state has come to be seen as violating the boatmen's age old customary practices and their shared moral rights. Indeed, such breaches of their customary rights have prompted boatmen to stage mass protests against what they perceive as their systematic exploitation and economic marginalization.

At the local level, moreover, the riverfront economy is organized in a way that highlights the significance of social and moral arrangements that mark the world of the boatmen community as it wrestles with the potential threats of market economy and state intervention.

Managing the riverscape and its boatmen

The work system used by the boatmen on the riverfront comprises two interrelated systems. The first and more general level spans the entire riverfront, where customary rules and regulations prescribe economic behaviour for all the boatmen. The second is more specific, at the ghat level, and offers a parallel but more nuanced moral economic order, whereby the normative ideas underpinning it are embraced in differing degrees, depending on the specific social and material conditions of the various ghats. The two systems are intrinsically connected as some of the rules and regulations, technical arrangements and social relations are similar and to a degree dependent on one another. The working system that applies to the riverfront is uniform. Similar rules apply to all boatman communities regardless of their ghat and socio-economic

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status. These rules define economic and social conduct along the riverfront and their overarching framework is based on territorial arrangements specifying the boundaries of the various ghats and the corresponding jurisdiction of each individual ghat community.

The majority of the ghats along the riverfront accommodate a distinct boatman community. Within these communities there is a clear socio-economic division between resident boatmen, known as *ghatwars*, and non-resident boatmen. As resident boatmen, these *ghatwars* have sole jurisdiction over their defined space, and this entitles them to (1) park their boats on that ghat and (2) derive their income from the ghat economy. By ghat economy, I mainly refer to the practice of taking passengers on boats. Other ghat-related jobs often differ according to the specific ghats and may include loading boats, diving, fishing (discreetly, as this is illegal in the area of Banaras), performing rituals, operating tea stalls and teaching people to swim in the summer.

The general work system rule across the riverfront is simple: passengers entering a specific ghat territory can only be taken on the boats of those boatmen (*ghatwars*) who have exclusive jurisdiction over that ghat. This is the rule of thumb that governs all economic transactions between the respective ghats in Banaras. This rule (necessarily) prevents non-resident boatmen from picking up passengers outside their designated territory. For example, a boatman from ghat (a) who takes passengers from his territory (ghat a) on his boat to another ghat (ghat b), is barred from taking new passengers from that ghat (b). In other words, unless the passengers want a return trip, the boatman must return empty to his own ghat (a). This rule is maintained across the entire riverfront and it is part of a simple and efficient system that enables the smooth running of boats along the Ganges and prevents potential conflict between communities.

Throughout my fieldwork, boatmen maintained that the work system of boating was an ancient one, which originated long ago and has been passed down orally over generations. A common reply to my inquiries about the origins of the system was that 'it has always been practised'(*dada par dada ka samay se*), 'it is a matter of custom, an age old custom that originates from the time of our ancestors (*purvaj*)'. A closer examination reveals, however, that the system has evolved over time to meet the needs and changing fortunes of boatmen across the riverfront. In other words, the rules regulating passenger distribution along the riverfront are deeply embedded in historical and social processes that affect the wider riverscape economy.

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The most evident social distinction within a ghat is between resident boatmen and non-resident boatmen. Both belong to the same caste (Mallah), but their social and occupational position and status within the community (i.e., either a specific ghat community or the whole riverfront) is markedly different. The resident boatmen (*ghatwars*) have the right to operate boats on a ghat, while the non-resident boatmen (*mallahis*/drivers) work as casual labourers for the latter and have no residential rights on the ghat. According to customary practice, one can only be a resident boatman of a ghat by virtue of patrilineal descent. Generally, the *mallahis* work as oarsmen for the resident/rightful boatmen for 50 per cent of their earnings.

The majority of boatmen who work on the river are able to recognize *ghatwars* and their respective ghats simply because they were brought up in the riverscape environment and the community is relatively small in number. According to customary law, a *ghatwar* is not allowed to either sell or rent his residential rights on a ghat to another boatman. In fact, boatmen are so familiar with their working environment that the majority are able to recite by heart the names of all 70-odd ghats in successive order. This mutual recognition that boatmen have of territory, rights and property makes the system transparent and provides a means for holding one another to account.

The riverfront is therefore characterized by a certain uniformity, and mutuality, which is morally bound. Uniformity in as much as the same rules apply along the entire riverfront also implies equality among all resident boatmen who share the same rights and privileges as their counterparts, regardless of their socio-economic status. In return, these rights are mutually recognized as binding upon all members of the community. The adherence to the rules and regulations governing the system is not forced through any single coercive authority imposing its will on the weaker members of the community. It results from an economic system based on customary practices and enforced by institutional restrictions, social relations and traditional values. Although state law allows anyone with a licence, regardless of caste or status, to operate a boating business, the work system, integrated by local norms and customs, prevents outsiders from entering the boating business. For boatmen, it is hardly necessary to enforce such institutional restrictions or formalize them in writing. As we shall see, in everyday life traditions are often contested and negotiated and there is a degree of flexibility within the work system to adapt to change.

Generally, the boatmen view their work system as part of their ancestral heritage and highlight its benefits and functions as mitigating conflict and

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ensuring order is maintained across the riverfront. They claim that the work system prevents potential competition over passengers between the respective ghat communities. According to the *ghatwars* I spoke with, it is rare for anyone within the community to transgress these rules. They claim that these customary practices were set in place by their ancestors for the benefit of everyone to ensure the rights of *ghatwars* across the riverfront are maintained. The following example of how the work system operates on the riverfront level is indicative of the efficiency of the system. It also demonstrates that, despite the apparent uniformity and equality among *ghatwars* in terms of rights and privileges, there are stark socio-economic differences amongst *ghatwars* across the respective ghats. These differences are underpinned by the historical and geographical variations that exist across the riverfront ghats.

A walk along the riverfront

Walking along the Ganga in Banaras is an experience that continues to attract many tourists and pilgrims, who marvel at the way myths, rituals and architectural wonders combine with the natural beauty of a living river. For the boatmen of Banaras, the riverfront is also their office: it is a working environment, which is highly regulated and is intrinsically connected to the seasonal and spatial organization of the riverfront and its ghats. The ghats, most of which are made of stone and concrete (*pakka*), form a lengthy chain that extends in a crescent shape along the western bank of the River Ganges. The distance between the southernmost ghat of the city (Assi ghat) and the northernmost one (Raj ghat) is approximately seven kilometres. The ghats are generally named after a place, a mythological figure or the patron/s who built them. The buildings and temples on the various ghats bear witness to the city's legacy as a place of princely patronage during the British raj, in which donations by Maharajas (princes from across India) for the building of such magnificent structures publicly expressed and asserted their royal legitimacy in India.[3] At the time, many of the ghats were owned and maintained by devout Hindu princes and princesses (rajas and ranis) and wealthy noblemen (thakurs). Unfortunately, these majestic buildings are in a growing state of neglect due to the withdrawal of princely patronage since the early twentieth century. Currently the majority of the ghats are under the jurisdiction of the Municipal Authority. The names of the ghats, however, still testify to their

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past glories and are clearly visible as they are painted in English and Hindi on the walls of the various buildings, temples and ghat walls along the riverfront.

There are no physical barriers restricting passage from one ghat to another across the riverfront, and during the dry season one can walk the length of the riverfront in under two hours. The boatmen's territorial mapping of the riverfront, however, differs from what is visible to the lay person. For the boatmen, the ghats have clear boundaries (*hads*), which indicate the precise place where each individual ghat territory begins and ends. Such territorial identification is the basis for the system of passenger distribution across the riverfront. The ghat boundaries marked by the boatmen are very different to those painted on the walls. For example, under the boatmen's territorial organization, Assi ghat encompasses the territory of the adjacent three ghats: Ganga Mahal, Rivan and Tulsi ghats. The northern border of Assi ghat is marked by a large water pump tower, built during the British time (known by the locals as *pampua ghat*). On Assi ghat there are four families of *ghatwars* who have sole rights to earn their livelihood in the territory under their jurisdiction. The territory north of the pump becomes the jurisdiction of the Bhadaini ghat boatman community, and covers the territory from the pump up to the steps leading down to Bhadaini ghat. Similarly, boundaries exist along the entire chain of ghats to mark the distinct territories of each respective boatman community. Moreover, according to my informants, these boundaries are sanctioned by local protective ghat deities known as Ghatwarin Ma, worshipped by the ghat community on specific occasions considered auspicious or risky, such as diving or going on a long trip.

The customary rules regulating the passenger distribution across the riverfront must be understood in concrete terms. Let me briefly return to the experience of the 'ordinary tourist' to illustrate the point. A tourist arriving at Assi ghat, either from the road or the alleys leading to the ghat, enters the area under the authority of the Assi ghat boatman community. The tourist is then approached by a boatman inquiring whether s/he would like to take a boat ride. Sometimes, though, the potential customer is clearly uninterested in boating, preferring to take a pleasant walk north along the ghats. As the person proceeds north, walking up the stairs, s/he crosses the 'invisible' ghat boundary and enters the jurisdiction of another ghat—Bhadaini ghat. Having entered the territory of a different ghat, the tourist would then be approached once more by boatmen asking: 'Hello boat? Madam/Sir do you want a boat?' So, by the time they reach the main ghat (covering the three kilometre stretch from Assi ghat) s/he would have been asked this same question, 'Hello boat?'

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at least a dozen times. Ironically, the only escape from this frankly annoying pestering is to take a boat ride. The *ghatwars* from smaller ghats, such as Nishad Raj ghat, are well aware of their disadvantage, as one boatman noted: 'Nishad ghat boatmen are poor because they don't get many customers, except the "irritated passengers" or "used customers" who come from the other ghats. We have no road access to our ghat, so nobody comes.' This also means that the prices of boating are generally less when one takes a boat from the smaller ghats, as they are often desperate to take tourists for almost any price.

This example illustrates the way in which the work system appears to limit the development of a market economy based on free competition. That is, the customary law underpinning the work system prevents the wealthier and more powerful boatmen from transgressing their boundaries to dominate other ghats and therefore they cannot maximize their profits. Surely, the *ghatwars* from smaller ghats are also held back and their prices have to stay low. In other words, the fact that such rules and practices apply to all *ghatwars* in a uniform and roughly equal fashion does not necessarily entail an even distribution of wealth and power. As the cited boatman above notes, a boatman's wealth is largely dependent on the ghat in which he works.

Different ghats have different earning potentials. A ghat may be considered commercially lucrative for historical, cultural and architectural reasons. For example the major ghats, such as Assi, Dasashvamedh and Manikarnika, are religiously significant places where ritual activities are continuously performed; these ghats draw large numbers of both pilgrims and tourists who participate in various ways in the cultural and economic activities that take place there. Other ghats, such as Gai ghat and Raj ghat, although less religiously significant, have an advantage because of their physical location and proximity to pilgrim hostels and train stations, and therefore obtain a high flow of passengers. Moreover, most of the major ghats have road access from the city facilitating easy access to the ghats. It is on such ghats that the boatmen's services are considerable. These services range from purely functional, taking people from one place to another, to more comprehensive services, such as assistance in rituals or organizing a hotel for the foreign visitor.

On smaller ghats, ferrying passengers is considered a bonus rather than a reliable source of income. For example, Nishad Raj ghat, named after Nishad Raj, the celebrated king of the Nishads from the epic Ramayana, mainly serves the daily needs of members of the boatman community who live in its proximity. Above Nishad Raj ghat the second largest Mallah/Nishad community in Banaras resides. The ghat space is used both for ritual purposes and community

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gatherings, as well as practices such as bathing, washing utensils, repairing boats and fishing equipment, and as a playground for their children. This ghat, although close to Assi ghat, lacks the physical and cultural advantages that render Assi ghat such an attractive destination for locals, pilgrims and tourists. Other smaller or community ghats are in a similar situation. In non-central ghats, such as Nishad Raj ghat, the boatman communities living there must resort to other means of earning, the most common being fishing, cultivating the fields on the other side of the river and other jobs not directly related to the river economy, such as sari weaving and whitewashing houses.

What is important to emphasize, however, is that under the work system of the riverfront, poorer *ghatwars* are still entitled to earn from the river economy; and boatmen from the less lucrative ghats exercise their rights to do so. These rights include: using the land on the eastern side of the river for agriculture, retrieving valuable artefacts from the river, and other provisional rights, which enable the weaker boatmen to secure their subsistence needs. It is because of their inability to earn from passengers that the boatmen of minor ghats, such as Nishad Raj, have the prerogative to practise cultivation. This provides them with a minimal subsistence and ensures that they can survive the difficult summer (monsoon) months. Thereafter, they may engage in other types of work to survive the rest of the year. Interestingly, the poorer members of the riverfront community do not see such actions as charity on the part of the wealthier and more powerful ones. On the contrary, these rights are theirs by virtue of belonging to the wider boatman community: all boatmen have the right to earn something from the riverscape.

The ethics of boating on the sacred river

There are certain provisions and measures built into the work system, which not only protect the interests of the *ghatwars* but also of the *mallahis*, ensuring they are also able to benefit from the river economy. The *mallahis* have certain rights enshrined in the customary laws across the riverfront. This is especially evident on the major ghats where *ghatwars* employ *mallahis* on a regular basis. On most of the major ghats it is the *mallahis* who ply and maintain the boats of the *ghatwars*, usually for 50 per cent of the earnings. There is no binding contract between them and indeed some of the *mallahis* shift from one ghat to another according to demand. The *mallahis* can be relatives of the *ghatwars* who come from the nearby villages to earn ready cash during the high season. The majority

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of these workers, however, have no close kinship relations with the *ghatwars* and are often employed during the busy times of the year on the major ghats where there is a large flow of passengers and a need for more working hands.

Because of the temporary nature of this working relationship, it seems *mallahis* on the main ghat do not pose a threat to the dominance of the *ghatwars*, despite cases where individual *mallahis* have succeeded in establishing themselves as *ghatwars*. I have not heard, however, of any collective action by *mallahis* working on the major ghats against their employers. Raj ghat is a striking example where the working relations between *ghatwars* and *mallahis* are clearly embedded in a wider set of social relations and ethical considerations. The *mallahis*' rights and privileges in the ghat work system appear to defy what one would call rational maximizing behaviour.

Raj ghat is located in what is considered to be the oldest part of the city. According to historical and archaeological accounts, the original settlers of the city first inhabited the Raj ghat plateau more than 2500 years ago.[4] The area was strategically advantageous for the original inhabitants as it was well situated on a high plateau bordering the River Ganga. Today, due to the ghat's proximity to the Kashi train station and the Grand Trunk Road, Raj ghat serves as the central terminus for pilgrim groups. It has a large flow of pilgrims arriving in Banaras from various parts of the continent, particularly Gaya (Bihar) in the southeast and Ayodhya in the northwest. Nowadays, a road leads directly to the ghat, and there are spaces where both trucks and buses can park and unload. The convenient setting of the ghat, the parking and adjacent facilities, such as pilgrim hostels (*dharmshalas*), make the place especially attractive for the many pilgrim groups arriving via road or train.

The centrality of Raj ghat as a port of call for visitors throughout the centuries is probably why the largest concentration of the Mallah community resides in this vicinity. According to boatmen, it is inhabited by the oldest and largest boatman community in Banaras—there are approximately 350 Mallah households. The community has several structures and temples marking its long-standing presence in the area. Over the ghat stands a well maintained *akhara* (wrestling ground) patronized by the Nishad community of Raj ghat. On the inside walls of the *akhara* episodes from the Ramayana are colourfully depicted; similarly, at the pilgrim drop-off point (bus park) there is a much larger painting of Lord Rama, Sita and Lakshmana being ferried across the River Ganga by a boatman (Kevat). At the top of this mural is the phrase: 'sometimes even the Lord depends on the services of devotees'. The episode figures in devotional songs, film and TV productions. As one boatman said: 'Everybody is familiar with this episode in the Ramayana, and

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the painting reminds the pilgrims that they are taking a boat ride on Ganga Ma, just like Lord Rama, Sita and Lakshman did. This is good for business.'

The social organization of the community is largely based on occupational activities. There is a functioning *panchayat* (community council) that operates on Raj ghat. The matters discussed in the *panchayat* are mostly to do with social affairs and it also organizes community events and discusses local issues regarding work relations and family disputes, ranging from marital problems to petty property claims. In some cases, boatmen prefer the *panchayat* assistance rather than approaching legal institutions, which are often costly and time consuming. The problem, as everyone seems to agree, is that the *panchayat* cannot sufficiently enforce its decisions. Therefore, when serious disputes arise over property and rights, members of the community generally favour using the legal system. It should be noted, however, that of the Mallah communities living on the riverfront, only those at Raj ghat and Nishad Raj ghat have a *panchayat* currently operating. At Raj ghat this is a result both of the antiquity of the community and the large number of its members living in the neighbourhood, the majority of whom still derive their livelihood from the river economy. Indeed, it is a community largely sustained by the pilgrimage industry and the ghat-related work readily available to most of its members.

The pilgrimage industry across Banaras offers unskilled work to a large number of people. The majority of the male members of the Mallah community living on Raj ghat derive their livelihood directly or indirectly from it and from ghat-related jobs. Such work involves carrying wood, operating tea stalls, selling religious paraphernalia to pilgrims, diving for coins thrown by pilgrims into the sacred river or working on boats as *mallahis*. Some boatmen work as wage labourers, unloading trucks full of wood onto huge boats, which are then ferried to Manikarnika ghat: the main cremation ghat.[5] The majority of boatmen, however, rely on the boating business and ferrying pilgrims as their main source of income.

Most pilgrims arriving in the city come on package tours and follow a similar itinerary. This involves *darshan* (the auspicious sight of god) and worship at the central sacred sites; most groups take boats to these sacred places. Travel by boat is both pleasant and practical as it is much easier to access the sacred places by water. Over the years, the boatmen have established a system to accommodate the large numbers of pilgrims arriving in Raj ghat. Under the overall system of passenger distribution, the territorial jurisdiction of Raj ghat covers the area from the north of the ghat where steps descend from near the train station to Prahlad ghat on the south. The system follows a rotation

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known as *pari* (turns, or shifts). There are eight families of *ghatwars* called *paridars* (*pari*-owners) who take successive turns operating a twelve-hour shift (i.e., from 6pm until 6am the next day). During this shift, the assigned *paridar* has the right over passengers arriving at the ghat. If, for any reason, he is unable to take the passengers, then the next paridar in line has the right to do so. The matter is somewhat complicated as the ghat territory is divided into two parts. The northern part is occupied by four different *ghatwar* families (I shall call them a cluster) that have the right to take passengers arriving from the train station area, while those working on the southern part have rights to passengers arriving from the road. The two clusters alternate between the locations when all (within each cluster) have had their respective turns.

As on other major ghats, the *ghatwars* of Raj ghat also employ *mallahis* to ply and maintain their boats. Generally, between one and three workers are sufficient for manning the boat and catering for the needs of the pilgrims. There are around 300 *mallahis* working on Raj ghat as part-time casual labourers. Due to the large number of *mallahis*, a rule was established specifying that only those people who are present on the bottom platform of the ghat at the time the passengers board the boat can serve as *mallahis* for that specific boat ride. If, for example, workers are late or decide to leave the area momentarily while the pilgrims perform ablutions and are not back by the time the boat departs, they are barred from working as *mallahis*. Only those *mallahis* present will earn and divide between them the 50 per cent share of the boat ride, while the other 50 per cent remains that of the *paridar*.

What is remarkable in this system, however, is that even in instances when a boat is full of pilgrims (i.e., there is no room for the *mallahis*), the *mallahi* present can still earn their share of the allotted 50 per cent by simply walking the parallel distance along the ghat that the boat will cover. Thus, a *mallahi* will calculate according to the number of passengers on board and his subsequent earnings whether it is profitable for him to walk the distance or not. These calculations have become more complex over the past decade with the introduction of motorboats by *paridars*. The benefits of motorboats are clear. A motorboat can perform the same task as a rowboat in less than half the time, meaning that the *paridar* can work many more rounds than with a rowboat. However, motorboats do not require *mallahis* (as oarsmen) and this has implications on how the boatmen perceive themselves, since previously, as workers, their source of production was their hard physical labour. Receiving 50 per cent of the earnings for the trip was seen as a decent wage for the hard labour performed by the workers. Nowadays, however, with the introduction

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of motorboats, we are witnessing the decreasing value of physical labour along with an increase in population and demand for work.

On Raj ghat the *mallahis* still retain their traditional rights as workers to earn their livelihood from the boating business. They continue to work on the boats, even though their labour is less needed and valued because of the increased use of motorboats. Some workers serve as guides to pilgrims around the sacred sites. For many others, however, tagging along for the ride in order to receive their share is the only alternative. The following example will illustrate just how this system operates in daily life. Two buses full of pilgrims arrived at the ghat. One hundred and four pilgrims were scheduled to visit the Vishvanath temple (considered to be the most sacred in Banaras) near the main ghat and each of the passengers paid Rs.10 for the return trip. The overall amount received was Rs.1040 out of which Rs.75 was deducted for fuel and the remaining Rs.965 was divided between the *mallahis* and *paridar*, leaving the *mallahis* a sum of Rs.482 to share among themselves. In this case only six *mallahis* boarded the boats and 21 others walked the distance so they could receive their share, which eventually amounted to Rs.17.8. Those *mallahis* on board were mainly concerned with directing and guiding pilgrims to the temples and safeguarding the pilgrims' belongings. The other workers who arrived on foot much later were only there as token workers so they could receive their due share.

When I asked why those workers who do nothing still receive money, the common answer was that it is traditional. The logic behind this was explained later by one of my main informants from the ghat, himself a *mallahi*: 'Anyone willing to work should be able to earn something. In this way we manage to earn Rs.40–50 a day to buy basic food (*dal roti chaal jata hai*). Everyone should eat, but for us this means we need to dig the well daily to drink the water; this is what I call poverty.' Thus, regardless of the underemployment that exists on the ghat, the *mallahis* are able to earn minimum subsistence from the boating industry. It is this notion of justice articulated in the idiom of rights which I examine in the concluding section of this chapter.

Sons of the Ganga

One of the most common words I heard when discussing the rights of boatmen in the city was the term *haq* (right/property). When used by the boatmen it often refers to their right to work in any water-related activity. Boatmen claim that as members of the Mallah/Nishad caste, they should have the prerogative

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over river-related jobs, such as fishing, boating, sandmining, swimming instruction and working in the Water Police. The term is also employed when asserting their ancestral rights to officiate rituals on the riverbank, a matter contested by Brahmin priests working on the ghats. Such usage of the term is directed towards an external audience, such as when pushing for acknowledgment by state authorities or other castes of the community's rights, deriving from their hereditary caste occupation. However, the rights boatmen derive from being members of the community are also directed internally, revealing shared ties and reciprocal relationships between members of the community. It is in this context that the term *haq* is also used to justify the fact that *mallahis* continue to earn from the ghat economy, though they may not work as oarsmen. The *mallahis* often use the term *haq* to indicate their moral rights to work as boatmen on the riverfront, regardless of the fact that they are not *ghatwars* and do not own a boat.

The word *haq* originates from the Urdu language and is in common usage in Arabic. According to the *Oxford Hindi-English Dictionary*, *haq* carries several meanings: 1. just, 2. right, 3. justice, 4. a claim, privilege, franchise, 5. due share, due claim, 6. duty, obligation, 7. behalf, benefit.[6]

The way in which the boatmen use the term suggests certain similarities between *haq* and the Arabic *haqq*. Such usage denotes the entitlements and possession one has by simply being born into the Mallah caste. Here the term *haq* implies equality and uniformity shared by all members of the community. Boatmen often speak of *Mallah ka haq* (the rights/entitlements of Mallahs) when referring to their inherited rights to practise activities associated with the River Ganga. Another example of how the term *haq* is applied in the discourse of social justice is found in the context of festivals and during rituals. In festivals, regardless of whether a boatman works as a fisherman or in any other job, he is equally entitled to retrieve artefacts from the river: it is his *haq* (right). This is particularly evident during certain festivals, such as Durga Puja and Saraswathi Puja, when thousands of worshippers from all over the city and the surrounding villages come to Banaras carrying big and small wooden statues of the goddesses. The festivals are marked by long processions that come to a stop on the major ghats. Thereafter, the worshippers take the statues of the goddesses (*murti*) onto boats midstream where they are ritually immersed (*visarjan*) and released into the holy river. Such occasions are a good source of income for the boatmen, especially *ghatwars*, as thousands of worshippers perform the ritual immersions. After the sacred idols are released, many boatmen set out and retrieve the idols from the water; once released into the river,

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the idols are considered the boatmen's *haq* (possession/property). They then strip the idols of their adornments (sometimes including gold jewellery) and clothing in order to use them and to resell the wood at markets. Interestingly, however, those who retrieve the sunken idols are not the wealthy *ghatwars*, but rather the poorer members of the community. The reason behind this is twofold. The *ghatwars* have already benefited substantially from the festival by carrying passengers. In addition, there is a moral expectation that they let other members of the community have their legitimate share of the earnings derived from the river economy. This relates to the fact that there is no territorial jurisdiction barring boatmen from taking anything out of the river. As one boatman told me, 'Mother Ganga does not care if you are a *ghatwar* or not, all boatmen are her devoted children.'

Indeed, boatmen use the name Gangaputra (Sons of the Ganga) to declare themselves as a particularly privileged group of people intimately associated with the river. They regard their relationship with Ganga as unique and exclusive: that is, Ganga is perceived as their mother and provider, not only in ritual circumstances where they operate as ritual specialists for locals during certain life-cycle rituals.[7] In the course of everyday life these people depend on the river for their livelihood, as it directly provides their food (fish and agricultural produce) and is a major source of earning through ferrying passengers. One good illustration of their role in the ritual economy of Banaras is the ritual known as *bachcha khudana.* (Literally, the term means 'causing the child to jump'.) During this ritual a young child (usually a boy) is offered to the river in an act of propitiation for Mother Ganga's help in the survival and wellbeing of the child as if he was her own.[8] The ritual involves throwing the child into midstream and his subsequent retrieval by a boatman. Thereafter the boatman returns the child to his family and receives credit in monetary and status terms. Apart from indicating a family's immense trust, faith and confidence in the boatmen, this ritual serves to reinforce the boatmen's own sense of place and identity. Boatmen regard the performance of this ritual as their *haq*; that is, they have a *moral obligation*, *duty* and *responsibility* to perform the ritual for the child, his family and Mother Ganga by virtue of their close relationship with the river.

At Raj ghat, moreover, the term *haq* is incorporated into everyday life, that is, it refers not only to a right practised during festival times or ritual practices, but also to daily activities. At Raj ghat such rights constitute part of the broader socio-economic relations between *mallahis* and *ghatwars. Mallahis* use the term to articulate their expectation of getting their fair share of the economic activities on the ghat from the wealthier *ghatwars*. At the same time, the *ghatwars*, as the

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wealthier members of the community, are expected to provide a minimum subsistence to the less privileged members of the community. The *ghatwars* comply with such expectations for a number of reasons. Firstly, if the needs of the *mallahis* are not met, the *ghatwars* face the real risk of social unrest, which could result in violence and damage to property. Secondly, the *ghatwars* have an interest in securing the support of the *mallahis* in order to mobilize them in times of crisis. I saw this myself during an organized demonstration against police harassment. *Mallahis* provide the numbers needed to stage impressive demonstrations against the government. In addition, *ghatwars* want to maintain good relationships with the rest of the community and having wide support from within the community during major social events demonstrates their generosity, wealth, power and popularity. Finally, manpower is also important in cases of conflict between *ghatwars* or between *ghatwars* and other ghat functionaries. It is in the *ghatwars*' best interest to retain broad support from the *mallahis* as it ensures a more secure and favourable environment to operate in.

The case of Raj ghat certainly demonstrates an explicit moral economy. The specific historical, geographical and social conditions at Raj ghat preserve strong elements of kinship, neighbourhood, and other forms of social relations characteristic of an integrated community. Economic behaviour is embedded in a wider set of social relations and modes of communication, including mutual obligation, reciprocity, justice and moral rights, all of which inform daily interaction in the course of everyday life.

I started this chapter by describing the '*Hello! Boat?*' phenomenon as the bane of all tourists visiting the ghats. To us it seems astonishing that the boatmen do not respond to the market and act in a manner more pleasing to their prospective customers. What I have shown, however, is that when you enter the ghats of Banaras, you are entering a cultural world, where certain personal ties, customary rules and moral expectations form human interaction and are intimately bound to the river economy and Mother Ganga.

Notes

1. This chapter is based on the author's book *Caste, Occupation and Politics on the Ganges* (Ashgate, 2008).

2. James C. Scott, *The Moral Economy of the Peasant: Rebellion and Subsistence in Southeast Asia*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1976; E. P. Thompson, 'The Moral Economy of the English Crowd in the Eighteenth Century', *Past and Present*, 50 (1971), pp. 76–136.

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3. Jonathan P. Parry, *Death in Banaras*, Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994, p. 43.

4. D. Eck, *Banaras: City of Light*, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1983.

5. The approximate salary for a worker unloading one truck is Rs 20–30.

6. *The Oxford Hindi-English Dictionary*, R.S. McGregor, ed., Oxford; New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1993, p. 1054.

7. See A. Doron, 'The Needle and the Sword: Boatmen, Priests and the Ritual Economy of Varanasi', *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies*, 29 (2006), pp. 345–67.

8. See also Anne Feldhaus, *Water and Womanhood: Religious Meanings of Rivers in Maharashtra*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1995, pp. 122–6.

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Glossary

āratī (aarti): worship with lights; a hymn of praise (Hindi)
asuras: a class of powerful beings who challenge the gods (Sanskrit)

bahu: daughter-in-law (Hindi)
bania: merchant (Hindi)
beedi: cigarette of tobacco rolled in a leaf (Hindi)
Bhai-Duj: a festive day in the Hindu calendar when sisters pay respect to their brothers (Hindi)
bhaiya: little brother; friend (Hindi)
bhajan: hymn; devotional song (Hindi)
bhāv: emotion, feeling, belief; a person entranced or possessed (Hindi)
bidi: *see* beedi
brahmachari: follower of the brahman way of life, which includes celibacy (Sanskrit)
budgerow: a river barge (Hindi)

cār dhām: the four [divine] abodes (Hindi); in the Himalayas this refers to the Hindu temples at Badrinath, Kedarnath, Gangotri, and Yamunotri
charpai (charpoy): light bedstead (Hindi)
chunri: tie-dyed cloth (Hindi)
coss: an Indian measure of distance equal to approximately 3 kilometres or 2 miles (Hindi)

daityas: a class of demons (Sanskrit)
dānavas: a class of demons (Sanskrit)
dandee: oarsman, boatman (Hindi)
darogah: chief of police, head constable (Hindi)
darshan: worshipfully viewing a deity (Hindi)

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Daśaharā: a festive day in the Hindu calendar; Ganga Dussehra is when the descent of the Ganges is celebrated (Sanskrit)
dhaba: an unpretentious restaurant offering a limited range of food (Hindi)
dharmsala/dharmshala: a pilgrim hostel (Hindi)
Dussehra: *see* Daśaharā

gandharva: a celestial musician (Sanskrit)
Gangotsav: celebration of the Ganga (Hindi)
garupa: grouper fish (Portuguese)
ghūmnā: to wander or roam (Hindi)
gurukul: a school associated with a guru (Hindi)

jajmani system: a traditional Indian system for the exchange of services (Hindi)
jātrā: folk religious pilgrimage (dialectical Hindi)
jethani: wife of husband's elder brother (Hindi)

kangan: bracelet of precious metal (Hindi)
Kashi: an alternate name for Varanasi
khalassee: sailor (Hindi)
kinnara: a type of gandharva with a human body and a horse's head (Sanskrit)

lākh: lac (Hindi)

mahant: chief priest of a temple or the head of a monastery (Hindi)
makara: a crocodile-like mythical sea monster (Sanskrit)
manjhee: steersman of a boat (Hindi)
mela: fair; gathering (often associated with pilgrimage) (Sanskrit)
mimbachi: from *binbashi* 'commander of a thousand' (Turkish)
mistry: skilled tradesman (Hindi)
mofussil: outlying districts, rural areas (Hindi)
munshi: secretary, writer, educated assistant (Hindi)

nāga: a demigod with half serpent and half human form (Sanskrit)
nanad: husband's sister (Hindi)
nīm: neem

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pahari: a hill-dweller (Hindi)
panda: brahman priest (Hindi)
panswai: small boat (Bhojpuri)
parva: section of a work of literature (Sanskrit)
piṇḍa: cake of meal offered to the spirits of ancestors (Hindi)
piṇḍadān: rite of offering a cake of meal to the spirits of ancestors (Hindi)
piśaca: a goblin, evil spirit (Sanskrit)
purnima: full moon (Hindi)

Rakhi: name of a festival in the Hindu calendar when a sister ties a decorative thread (called a *rakhi*) around the wrist of a brother (Hindi)
rākṣasa: demonic creature (Sanskrit)

śakti: divine power; a goddess or consort of a god (Sanskrit)
śala: sal tree (Sanskrit)
sangam: confluence of the Yamuna and the Ganges at Allahabad (Hindi)
sankirtan: celebrating with devotional songs (Hindi)
serang: boatswain (Urdu)
seth: a prosperous merchant (Hindi)
Shaiva: devoted to the god Shiva or one of the deities associated with him (Sanskrit)
sipahi (sepoy): soldier (Hindi)
sircar: purchasing agent; steward (Hindi)
śrāddha: Hindu ceremony for deceased relatives (Sanskrit)
stotra: a hymn of praise (Sanskrit)

vahana: vehicle, the animal associated with a deity (Sanskrit)
Vaishnava: devoted to the god Vishnu or one of the deities associated with him (Sanskrit)
vibhuti: sacred ash (Sanskrit)

yakṣa: a kind of demigod (Sanskrit)
yātrā: formal religious pilgrimage (Sanskrit)
yuga: an aeon (Sanskrit); there are four ages in Hindu mythology and the present age is known as Kaliyuga

zamindar: landlord, landowner (Hindi)

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Index

Alakananda (river) 241, 309
Allahabad (Prayag) 42–3, 47, 87–8, 93–5, 108, 201, 207, 209, 216, 219–20, 233, 281, 286
Amar Singh Thapa 65, 66, 304–5, 306–7, 318, 320

Banaras, *see* Varanasi
Bentinck, Lord William 207–8, 212
Bhagavad Gita 118, 223, 260, 290
Bhagirath (Bhagiratha) 11–12, 14, 15, 27, 28, 66, 104, 227, 241, 304, 306, 308–9, 314–18, 320–1
Bhagirathi (river) 14, 28, 61–4, 65, 68–9, 102–3, 109–10, 113–14, 241, 302–3, 305–6, 308–10, 312–20
Bhairav (Bhairuji) 64, 65, 66, 255, 257, 258–9, 260, 262–8, 307
Brahma 6–7, 11, 14–15, 17, 26–8, 80, 81, 104, 206, 227, 236, 241, 242, 248, 277, 308
Brahman 80, 82, 244, 310–11
brahmans (brahmins) 27, 28, 62, 64, 66, 80–2, 83, 84, 107, 125, 141, 206, 207, 215, 225, 246, 258, 305, 307–8, 319–20, 337
Brahmaputra (river) 101, 188

Calcutta, *see* Kolkata
caste xiii–xiv, xvi, 28, 81–3, 87, 106–7, 123, 125, 141, 199–200, 205–8, 218–19, 252–5, 264–9, 289, 328, 333, 337
char dham 238

Dasashvamedh Ghat 79, 126, 274–5, 287, 289, 291, 331
dharma 119, 200, 253, 255–7, 288–9, 294
Diwali 84
Durga 96, 202, 223, 224, 226, 337

East India Company xvi, 199–201, 208, 215–16, 305, 319
Eden, Emily 206, 210

fakir, *see* sannyasi
festivals/fairs (mela) 83–4, 101, 168–72, 178–85, 190–1, 194–5, 226–30, 240, 337–8
Fraser, James Baillie 61–9, 305–7, 309, 318–19

Ganga
  boatmen xiii–xv, 52, 70–2, 76–7, 87–9, 92–9, 106, 127, 135–7, 142–3, 186, 201, 208, 325–40
  film 146–150, 333
  fishing 52, 71, 88–9, 91, 107–8, 135–7, 138–40, 142, 162, 226, 275, 292, 327, 332, 337
  goddess xii–xiii, 17, 20, 66, 105, 147, 189, 226–9, 233–4, 236, 239–41, 247–8, 274, 303–4, 308–12

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irrigation 88, 102, 104, 276–83
mother xi, xiii–xv, xvii, 38–41, 101, 115, 121, 148, 153–5, 221, 226, 233–4, 235, 244–7, 255, 257, 261–3, 268, 274, 277, 284–7, 312, 321, 338
mythology 10–16, 17–25, 26–8, 105, 147, 187–8, 233, 240–3, 247–8
painting and sculpture 104–6, 243–4, 292, 333–4
pilgrimage 69, 100–3, 109, 122, 146, 219, 228, 233–5, 238, 252–71, 284–5, 291, 293, 304, 313–16, 321, 334
poetry and song xiv–xv, 30–41, 138, 149, 218–22, 228, 233, 239–40, 242, 243–4, 246, 255, 260–7, 310–12, 333
pollution xvii, 102–3, 107, 123, 146, 240, 272, 274–5, 284–9, 292–5, 302, 321–2
ritual 81–4, 117–18, 128–9, 223–5, 226–7, 234, 245, 248, 257, 265, 286, 293–4, 315, 337–8
source 67–9, 100–2, 109–12, 187, 233, 312–21
trade and commerce xvi, 50, 52, 215–16, 225, 325–39
water (Gangajal) xiv–xv, xvii, 82, 103–4, 122, 148, 223, 225, 227, 229, 242, 262, 287–8, 291–3, 310–12, 314
woman 18–19, 147, 222–3
Ganga Mandir 66, 115–16, 303–8, 314–15, 318, 320–1
Gangasagar, *see* Sagar Island
Gangotri 61–2, 64–9, 101–3, 109–13, 115–16, 146–7, 233, 302–22
Gangotri Glacier 309, 314–16, 319–21
Garhwal 146, 303–5, 315
Gaurikund 65, 303, 308, 317–19
Godavari (river) xiv, 26, 28, 234, 238
Gomukh 69, 312–22
Gurkhas 62, 66, 114, 304–5

Haridwar (Hardwar) xii, 88, 100, 103–4, 120–1, 233, 254, 256, 276–85, 302
Himalaya 10, 12, 43, 67, 146, 101–3, 109, 188, 233–4, 238, 243, 302, 307, 313, 315, 318–19
Hodgson, J.A. 306, 319–20

Indra 25, 104, 236, 239, 240–1, 246
Indus (Sindhu) 188–9, 234, 239

Jagannatha (poet) 239–40, 243–4, 246–7
Jumna, *see* Yamuna
Jayadeva (poet) 222

Kailash 27, 83, 100, 104–6
Kali 208, 220–1, 224
Kaliyuga 187, 234, 247
Kalidasa 147, 244
Kapila (sage) 7, 8, 10, 228, 241
Kapoor, Raj xvi, 146, 147
Kashi, *see* Varanasi
Kaveri (river) 234
Kolkata (Calcutta) 55, 101, 105, 108, 138–9, 199, 202, 229, 215–17
Krishna 118, 222, 242–3, 248, 310–11
kshatriyas 15, 27, 28, 125
Kumbh mela 87, 95, 103, 108

Lakshmi 84, 106, 242, 304
linga 101, 223, 245, 258, 316, 318
Lord William Bentinck (ship) 203, 210, 213

Madho Singh II 305
Mahabharata xi–xiii, 17–25, 92, 106–7, 147, 161, 189, 225, 228, 238, 241, 246, 316

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makara 105, 226–7, 230
Meghna (river) xvii, 101
Metcalfe, Sir Charles 73, 206
moksha xii, 110, 121, 234, 247, 255–6, 287
Mukhba (village) 62, 304

Narmada (river) 102, 234
Nehru, Jawaharlal xii, 42–3, 128, 235–6, 238
Nepal 114, 284, 304–5, 316

Padma (river) xvii, 101, 135–45
Parvati 26–8, 105, 154, 157, 243–4, 248, 303
Patna xvi, 50–1, 56–7, 100, 203
Prayag, *see* Allahabad
puranas 27, 171, 220, 225, 234, 241, 242–3, 244–5, 274, 292
Purusha 236, 238

Radha 170, 222, 242–3, 248
Ram (Rama) xiv–xv, 3–16, 262–3, 172, 333–4
Ramayana xii, xiii, 3–16, 100, 105, 107, 241, 258, 308, 316, 331, 333–4
Rameshwaram (Ramesvaram) 238, 301
Rishikesh 115–19
Roy, Ram Mohan 215, 225

sadhu, *see* sannyasi
Sagara and his sons 3–12, 14–15, 27, 227–8, 241–2
Sagar Island (Gangasagar) 101, 227–9, 233, 284
samsara 200, 221
sannyasi (sadhus, fakirs) 75, 83, 87, 91, 102, 168–70, 179–82, 286, 313, 314
Sarasvati 102, 105, 233–4, 239, 242, 288, 304, 337
Seal, Mutty Lal 216–17
Sen, Ramprasad 220–1, 223–4
shakti 221, 233, 243–5
Shantanu 17, 19–21, 23–5, 189, 246
Shaiva (Shaivite) 169, 243, 247, 277
Shiva xiii, 12–13, 26–8, 80–3, 104–5, 148, 157, 169–70, 171, 206, 221, 223–4, 227, 229, 233, 241–8, 258–9, 266–7, 277, 306–8, 316, 318
Sindhu, *see* Indus

Tagore, Dwarkanath 215–16
tirtha xvii, 233–4, 235, 238, 242, 246, 252–6, 260, 269
Titash (Titas) (river) 159–61, 164

Vaishnava (Vaishnavite) 222, 241, 247, 277
Vallabha xi, xii, 310–11, 321–2
Varanasi (Banaras, Benares, Kashi) xiii, 48–9, 59, 79–81, 83–4, 101, 108, 126–7, 146, 151, 156, 190, 215, 233, 242, 246, 273–5, 284–5, 287, 325, 327, 329, 331, 333–4, 336, 337
vedas 27, 79, 80–2, 84, 119–20, 225, 236–7, 239, 241, 246, 247, 288, 311
Vidyapati (poet) 222, 310, 311–12, 321–2
Vishnu 26–8, 81, 87, 104, 120, 187, 206, 224, 227, 233, 236, 240–5, 247–8, 274, 277

Yamuna (Jumna) 42, 47, 87, 104, 105, 219, 222, 233, 234, 237–8, 277, 278, 285, 286, 288, 304

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and the co-editor, with Monika Thiel-Horstmann, of *Living Texts from India* (Wiesbaden 1989). He is currently writing a biography of the late 18th and early 19th century Gorkha general Amar Singh Thapa.

Ahmad Behbahani (1777–1819) was a learned Shia cleric from northern Iran who travelled in India between 1805 and 1809. He is the author of *Mir'at ul-Ahwal-i Jahan Numa* (World-reflecting Mirror), which includes an account of his travels in India. The work is dedicated to the prince Mohammad Ali Khan Bahadur Qajar, who the author thought would be interested in the state and condition of all countries.

Henry T. Bernstein studied in the United States and was a Senior Lecturer in the History Department, St Mary's College, London, from 1967 to 1986. He is the author of *Steamboats on the Ganges* (first published Bombay 1960) and *And None Afraid: Soviet-Western Suspicion and Trusting from Red October to* Glasnost *Dialogue* (Oxford 1991).

Johannes A.B. van Buitenen (1928–1979) began his studies in Indian philosophy, philology, and literature in the Netherlands. He was later George V. Bobrinskoy Professor of Sanskrit, Department of South Asian Languages and Civilizations, University of Chicago. His translation of books 1–5 of the *Mahabharata* was published by University of Chicago Press (1973–8).

Steven G. Darian is Professor Emeritus of Linguistics and Education at Rutgers University, where he was formerly Professor of Linguistics and Comparative Literature. He is the author of *English as a Foreign Language* (1971), *Understanding the Language of Science* (2003), and *The Ganges in Myth and History* (1978).

Assa Doron is Associate Professor of Anthropology, College of Asia and the Pacific, The Australian National University, Canberra. He has worked on a range of topics, including the cultural politics of disadvantaged groups, new media, and the effects of mobile phones on contemporary Indian society, and most recently, waste and public health. His recent books include *Life on the Ganga: Boatmen and the Ritual Economy of Banaras* (Cambridge 2013) and, co-authored with Robin Jeffrey, *The Great Indian Phone Book: How Cheap Mobile Phones Change Business, Politics and Daily Life* (Harvard; Hurst 2013, and published in India under the title *Cell Phone Nation*, Hachette 2013).

Diana L. Eck is Professor of Comparative Religion and Indian Studies, Frederic Wertham Professor of Law and Psychiatry in Society, and the Director

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of The Pluralism Project, at Harvard University. Her work on India includes the books *Banaras, City of Light* (1982), *Darsan: Seeing the Divine Image in India* (first published 1981; 3rd edition, 1998) and *India: A Sacred Geography* (2012).

Anne Feldhaus is Professor of Religious Studies at Arizona State University. She works on the religious traditions of the Marathi-language region of western India and specializes in folk Hinduism, medieval Hinduism, and religious geography. Her publications include *Connected Places: Region, Pilgrimage, and Geographical Imagination in Maharashtra* (2003), and *Water and Womanhood: Religious Meanings of Rivers in Maharashtra* (1995).

James B. Fraser (1783–1856) was a Scottish travel writer and artist. Before travelling in India, he worked on his father's sugar plantation in the West Indies. He was a skilled watercolour painter of landscapes in the 'picturesque' style. An edited version of his account of the journey to locate the sources of the Yamuna and Ganges rivers was published as *Journal of a Tour through Part of the Snowy Range of the Himala Mountains* (1820).

Amitav Ghosh is an English-language novelist and essayist who was born in Calcutta. He has taught at Columbia, Harvard, and Delhi universities, and has been awarded honorary doctorates by Queens College, New York, and the Sorbonne, Paris. His novels include *The Glass Palace* (2001), *The Hungry Tide* (2005), and the first two volumes of a trilogy: *Sea of Poppies* (2008) and *River of Smoke* (2011).

Ann Grodzins Gold is Thomas J. Watson Professor of Religion and Professor of Anthropology, Syracuse University. Her research is rooted in over thirty years of ethnographic engagement with religion and culture in provincial North India and concerns diverse topics: pilgrimage, gender, expressive traditions, environmental history, and landscape and identity in a small market town in Rajasthan. Her books include *Fruitful Journeys: The Ways of Rajasthani Pilgrims* (1988) and *In the Time of Trees and Sorrows: Nature, Power and Memory in Rajasthan* (2002, co-authored with Bhoju Ram Gujar).

Paul R. Golding worked on the translation of *Bahati Ganga* [The Flowing Ganges], a collection of stories by Shiv Prasad Mishra (Rudra Kashikey), in Washington, DC, and in Banaras. The result, *Tales of Banaras: The Flowing Ganges: The Life and Lore of India's Sacred City on the Ganges*, was published in 1997.

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Robert P. Goldman is Professor of Sanskrit, University of California, Berkeley. His areas of scholarly interest include Sanskrit literature and literary theory, Indian epic studies, and psychoanalytically oriented cultural studies. He has published widely in these areas and is perhaps best known for his work as the Director, General Editor, and a principal translator of a massive and fully annotated translation of the critical edition of the *Valmiki Ramayana*.

A.F. Haider is former director of the Arabic and Persian Research Institute, Patna. He completed a translation of Ahmad Behbahani's account of his travels in India from *Mir'at ul-Ahwal-i Jahan Numa* with the aid of a grant from the Indian Council of Historical Research, New Delhi. Professor Haider is also the author of *Administrative Structure of the Safavid Empire* (Patna 2000).

Ernest B. Havell (1861–1934) was an English art historian and arts administrator who was Principal of the Calcutta School of Art from 1896 to 1906. Havell helped found the India Society, which aimed to educate people in Britain about Indian art through lectures, exhibitions, and publications. He was the author of many books on Indian art and history, including *Handbook of Indian Art* (1920) and *Benares, The Sacred City: Sketches of Hindu Life and Religion* (1905).

Chandrashekhar Kambar is a Kannada playwright, poet, novelist, folklorist, film director, and scholar, who was founder vice-chancellor of Kannada University, Hampi, Karnataka. He is committed to preserving and promoting Kannada literature and culture, and writes in the Kannada dialect of north Karnataka. His plays and other works have been translated into English and several Indian languages.

Brij V. Lal is Professor of Pacific History in the College of Asia and the Pacific, The Australian National University, Canberra. His research interests include history and politics of South Pacific and Fiji, the culture and history of the Indian diaspora, and the problems of writing about societies with unwritten pasts. His publications include *Chalo Jahaji: On a Journey through Indenture in Fiji* (2012); *Intersections: History, Memory, Discipline* (2011) and *Mr Tulsi's Store: A Fijian Journey* (2001). He was general editor of *The Encyclopedia of the Indian Diaspora* (2006).

Honoria Lawrence (1808–1854) was an Englishwoman who spent the years 1837–1854 in India with her husband Sir Henry Lawrence who was a soldier-administrator in the East India Company. She travelled extensively in

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north-western India, recording her experiences in many letters and journals. A selection was published in *The Journals of Honoria Lawrence: India Observed, 1837–1854*, edited by J. Lawrence and A. Woodiwiss (1980).

Yann Lovelock is an English writer, editor, and translator, who worked with Barbara Painter to translate Manik Bandopadhyay's *Padmanadir Majhi*, which was published in 1973 as *Padma River Boatman*. He is the author of several collections of poetry and has also published translations of poetry from the Walloon dialect of Belgium.

Adwaita Mallabarman (1914–1951) was a Bengali writer who was born on the Titash River in a district of Bengal that is now located in Bangladesh. He worked as a journalist on several Bengali newspapers and is noted for his semi-autobiographical novel *Titas Ekti Nadir Nam* [*A River Called Titash*].

Shiv Prasad Mishra (1911–1970) was the son of a Hindu priest from Banaras. He became a lecturer at Banaras Hindu University in 1951 and also wrote stories under the pen-name Rudra Kashikey. His stories are written in a mixture of literary Hindi, which includes many Sanskrit loan words, and the local dialect from Banaras, which is a form of Bhojpuri. A collection of his stories, *Bahati Ganga* [The Flowing Ganges], was first published in 1952.

Jawaharlal Nehru (1889–1964) was independent India's first Prime Minister from 1947 until 1964. Among his prolific writings were several books, including a collection of letters written to his daughter Indira, published as *Glimpses of World History* (1934), his autobiography, *Toward Freedom* (1941), and *The Discovery of India* (1946).

Barbara Nelson is a Lecturer in the College of Asia and the Pacific, The Australian National University, Canberra. Her research focuses on the way bodhisattva practice is depicted in Mahayana Buddhist texts in Sanskrit and on the translation and reception of these texts outside Asia.

Eric Newby (1919–2006) was a British travel writer who worked as travel editor for the *Observer* newspaper from 1964 to 1973. He published many books, including *The World Atlas of Exploration* (1975), but is best known for his early works *A Short Walk in the Hindu Kush* (1958) and *Slowly Down the Ganges* (1966).

Barbara Painter, from the United States, studied the folklore and language of Bengal. Her translation, with Yann Lovelock, of the ballad 'Sojan Badia Ghat'

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by renowned Bengali poet Jasim Uddin was published as *Gypsy Wharf* in the UNESCO Collection of Representative Works Pakistan Series (1969). *Padma River Boatman* (Brisbane 1973) is her translation, with Yann Lovelock, of Manik Bandopadhyay's *Padmanadir Majhi*, which was first published in 1936.

A.K. Ramanujan (1929–1993) was a critic, scholar, translator, poet, and folklorist. He wrote in English and Kannada, and translated from Kannada and classical Tamil. He held multiple appointments at the University of Chicago, among them William E. Colvin Professor of South Asian Languages and Civilizations. He is known for introducing Sangam literature to the English-speaking world.

Raja Rao (1908–2006) was an Indian philosopher and English-language fiction writer who was Professor of Philosophy at the University of Texas at Austin from 1966 to 1983. After studying in France, he returned to India to participate in the independence movement. His best known novel is *The Serpent and the Rope* (1960). He advised reading his collection of short stories, *On the Ganga Ghat* (1989), as if it were a novel.

Vikram Seth was born in Calcutta and is the author of novels, poetry, stories, and non-fiction in English. He became well known for his novel, *A Suitable Boy* (1993), which is over 1,300 pages long, but has published in many other genres, including poetry, travel, children's stories, and memoir. His work includes a novel in verse, *The Golden Gate* (1986), and poetry translated from Chinese.

Raghubir Singh (1942–1999) was born in Jaipur and worked as a photographer in India while living in New York, Paris, and London. He is known for his innovative use of colour in documentary and landscape photography. He taught at the School of Visual Arts, Columbia University, and at The Cooper Union. His works include *The Ganges* (1992), where his photographs are accompanied by descriptive text, and *A Way into India*, which was published posthumously in 2002.

Vijay Singh is an Indian historian, journalist, filmmaker, and writer, who lives in Paris. His film adaptation of his first novel, *Jaya Ganga: In Search of the River-Goddess* (1985), was released in India in 1997. He has since directed another feature film, *One Dollar Curry* (2004), and two documentaries, including *India by Song* (2010).

Virendra Singh worked with the University of Wisconsin Year in India programme and introduced Paul R. Golding to India and Hindi. His translation,

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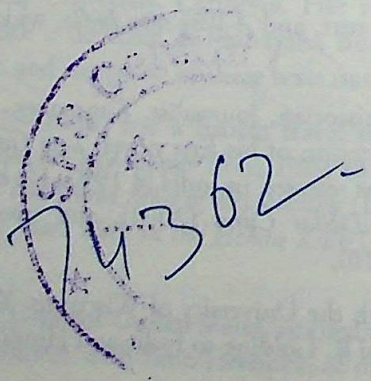
with Paul R. Golding, of *Bahati Ganga* [The Flowing Ganges], a collection of stories by Shiv Prasad Mishra (Rudra Kashikey), was published in 1997 as *Tales of Banaras: The Flowing Ganges*: *The Life and Lore of India's Sacred City on the Ganges*.

Jean-Baptiste Tavernier (1605–1689) was a French merchant who travelled extensively as a private individual. *Les six voyages de Jean-Baptiste Tavernier* (1676) combines notes and observations he made during his six journeys to Persia and India between 1630 and 1668. It was intended to be a guide for other travelling merchants. By 1682 it had been translated into English, French, Italian, and Dutch. The first volume covers Turkey and Persia and the second volume India and its neighbours.

Ilija Trojanow is a Bulgarian-German writer, editor, translator, and filmmaker. He spent part of his childhood in Africa and founded publishing houses that specialized in publishing African literature. His account of his journey along the Ganges from its source was published in German as *An den inneren Ufern Indiens* (2003) and in English as *Along the Ganga* (2005). *The World is Big* (2008) is a film based on his autobiographical novel *Die Welt ist groß und Rettung lauert überall* (1996).

Shakuntala Varma (1923–2003) was born in Allahabad, became an accomplished performer of Indian classical music, and acquired an in-depth knowledge of Indian mythology and folklore. She collected and translated Bhojpuri marriage songs of the Gangetic plain. The results of her work were published in 2005 as *Kahe ko Byahi Bidesh*, which is a parallel text in Bhojpuri (in Devanagari script) and English.



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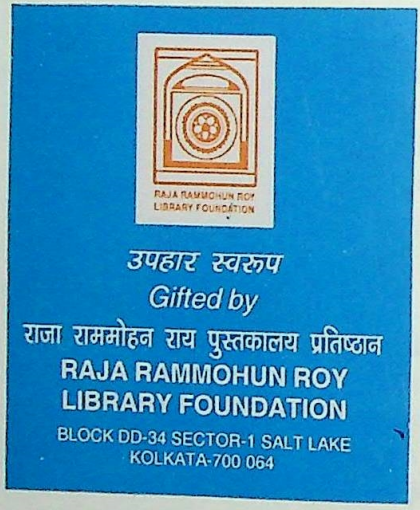

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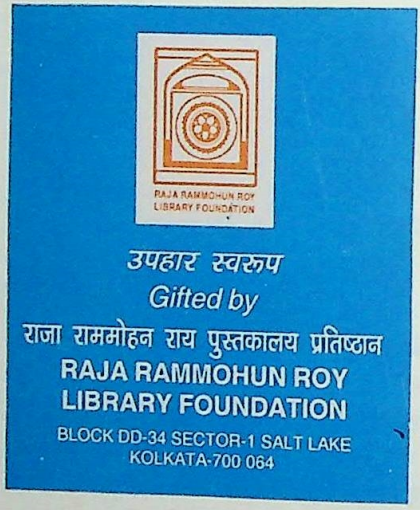

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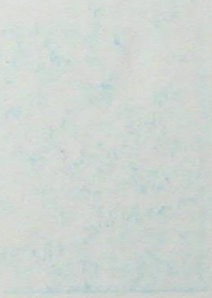

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According to the epic Ramayana, King Bhagiratha believed that the goddess Ganga could bring salvation to his ancestors who had been cursed by a seer. As a result of his religious austerities she descended from Heaven to Earth, with the journey mediated by Lord Shiva, who subdued Ganga's tempestuous flow through his matted locks. To this day, for the Hindus in India, the Ganga remains more than a river—she is the epitome of all sacred waters and the quintessential symbol of India.

To other Indians, and to foreign travellers for hundreds of years, the Ganga has been the spine of India, conveying goods, people, and ideas across thousands of kilometres and nurturing one of the world's most fertile agricultural systems.

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